HEROS III

A Celebration of Masculine Passion



Featuring -

The X-Files
Quantum Leap
Miami Vice
BATTLESTAR GALACTICA
Start Trek - Next Generation
Vaious Poetry
Highlander/Nick Knight

Heros – is an adult multi-media "slash" zine
(some stories depict the development of intimate relationships between characters of the same sex)

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A word from our sponsor...

Two o'clock in the morning and the printer is hissing forth the last few pages of my this my third issue. Wow...

What you hold is the product of many a late night, many a phone conversation, some red wine and lots and lots of coffee. It's erotic, bizarre, funny, full of angst and passion and loaded with cool images that I hope will haunt you long after you turn the last page. Linger over this, enjoy it. If it brings you pleasure, I hope you will share it with a friend. Show your appreciation by buying them a copy of their own! Please don't copy it.

My thanks to Alayne Gelfand for the stories she edited and all her advice and encouragement. Thanks too to Dovya Blacque for the X-Files story, winner of the wildest title, and Wendy Rathbone for her usual help and support.

You may notice a different look to this issue. Big news! I got a printer, a wonderful gadget that can do all kinds of way cool fonts. I subsequently went through hell trying to work out a marriage between the newcomer and my WordStar files. I was persuaded to convert to WordPerfect complete with a handy conversion comand. This nifty idea caused me to loose all of my second issue of QUANTUM LEAP CONTINUUM. The lone survivor has found a home here. The story is called, Snowblind.

I live in a remote cabin along the beautiful Santiam river, which provides my watchable entertainment. I don't get tv! Still, I managed to capture a migrating computer programmer who forced one decent font into my system. I can now print my zines myself without begging my loving sister to do it at work. So get to know this font, love it, like I do. It's a vast improvement.

To those of you who asked where the poetry went in issue 2, well it's in this issue, along with new stuff I hope you'll like, including a little collection of Professionals poems that was supposed to be in the last issue with the Pros story. These things happen, luckily it was my stuff so I didn't leave out anyone who wouldn't forgive me. Why doesn't the poetry have page numbers? Can you believe I just printed out the whole zine and forgot them?

HEROES is getting progressively spicier. This issue is hot! I handled GOLD FEVER with asbestos gloves! That doesn't mean my guidelines have changed. The focus is still on character development, passion, angst, action and suspense. I want the characters to remain true to themselves which makes slash a real challenge. I want what Wendy calls, "that kick to the gut." To every writer who rises to the challenge to create masculine passion in media fiction, I offer my heart-felt congratulations. It ain't easy folks, but oh, boy is it fun when it works!

The cool thing about fandom is there's something for everyone. I'm trying to create a unique zine full of lusty, compassionate, heroic characters. Luckily, someone already did the hard work of bringing them to life on the screen! Thank goodness for the VCR and all of you who sent me tapes over the winter. Cabin fever has never been so much fun...

If you're inspired to write a sensual masterpiece after reading this book, Heroes 4 is open to camera-ready copy. Non-graphic sensuality and emotional suspense is my weakness, but most slash makes me cringe. No dewy-eyed effeminate guys or teddy-bear cuteness please. Go for the gut!

I hope this zine gives you, "that kick."

HEROES THREE

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POETRY-- In case you actually want to find it, here's a helpful jungle guide.

MIAMI VICE

TABOU appears just before the story Sweet Sensation.

THE ST. VITUS appears just after Sweet Sensation.

MIAMI TONIGHT and TEMPTATION appear just before Gold Fever.

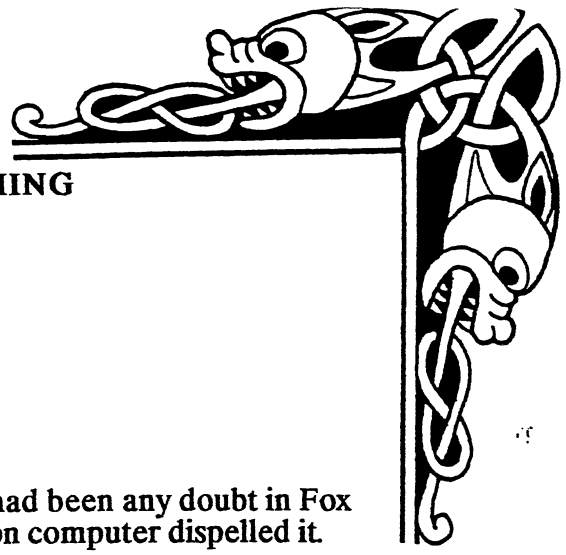
BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

The poems: WARRIORS and ON CAPRICA appear just before Code Of Honor. STARBUCK just after it.

THE PROFESSIONALS.

COPPER, THE MERCENARY, SUNSHINE, BODIE, RAY and THE FIRST DAY OF SUMMER appear just after Etiolate Gods.

COVER ART BY SHERRI"brain-child" BRYANT



X-FILES

A BILLION ANGELS SCREAMING

by

Dovya Blacgue

There was something unequivocally wrong. If there had been any doubt in Fox Mulder's mind, his unlocked office door and active, logged-on computer dispelled it.

At first, he'd been willing to explain away his very odd morning, trying to be logical, not to jump to wild conclusions... to think like his partner, Dana Scully, might in the same situation. And, at first, he'd been successful. He'd found a pay-phone, called a cab, went home and cleaned himself up before coming into work. Just as though nothing was wrong, strange or inexplicable. He'd written off the fact that he'd awakened that morning to find himself sitting on a loading dock on Baltimore's active waterfront. He'd ignored the fact that his last memory was of searching the fifth floor of an abondoned warehouse with his partner. A warehouse that was miles and, it seemed, hours from where he found himself. He'd even managed to ignore the fact that he felt like ten kinds of hell and looked worse. But now...

"Mulder?"

He jumped at the sound, turning sharply toward the office door. "Don't *do* that!" he snapped, throwing himself into his desk chair and leaning back, eyes closed.

"Sorry," Scully offered carefully, moving to lean against Mulder's desk. "What are you doing here?"

Mulder's eyes remained shut. "I work here, remember?"

When Scully didn't respond, he opened his eyes and looked up at her. She appeared worried, there was definitely something on her mind.

"What?" Mulder asked, becoming suspicious himself.

"If this is a joke, Mulder, it's not funny."

Utterly lost, Mulder could only stare at her. "What are you talking about? What joke?"

Scully's pretty face shifted into disapproval, barely touched by affectionate amusement. "Okay. You win," Scully said, holding up both hands in defeat and shrugging.

Mulder frowned, sitting forward, leaning his elbows on the desk. "Scully, I have no idea what you're going on about."

"Right. You have no idea why I'm surprised to see you here when I just left you upstairs in Lark's office. Fine."

"But..." Mulder felt the headache that had been plaguing him since he woke up worsen and he rubbed distractedly at his forehead. "I haven't been anywhere near Lark since the Trenton case. Which, I'm sure, has made us both ecstatic." He sighed. "If *you're* playing some weird joke then you've picked the wrong day. I feel awful."

Scully turned from where she'd been eyeing the bulletin board by the door, concern replacing the patient disapproval in her eyes. "You do look ill," she muttered grudgingly, coming around the desk to place a knowing hand on his forehead, then on one cheek. "You're hot. Probably just a touch of flu or something. Why don't you go home? There's nothing more we can do on the Body Snatcher case."

Mulder shook his head, pushing her hand gently away from his face. "Look," he said reasonably, "I've had the worst morning of my life and now you're acting like we've solved this case when we both know we haven't got a clue. I'm not up to it. Whatever it is."

Scully leaned one hip against the desk, not moving from Mulder's side, crossing her arms and looking at him searchingly. "There *is* something wrong, isn't there? You're not acting right." When he rolled his eyes at her, she smiled. "Right for you, I mean," she added with a grin, but grew serious again. "What happened this morning?"

Mulder rubbed at his tired eyes, finally blinking up at her. "I woke up in Baltimore, on the docks, with no idea of how I got there or why. The last thing I remember was walking through the stairwell door on the fifth floor of the warehouse last night. I saw... something... and then... Well, then nothing until I woke up a few hours ago. And, before you ask, I wasn't mugged because I still had my keys, ID, wallet, everything."

Scully's lips twitched as though uncertain whether to smile or not. She started to say something, closed her mouth, looking distractedly at the space between molecules in the air, then said in a painfully patient voice, "You met me at the stairwell door on the fifth floor. You told me the loft was empty, there was nothing to find. We turned around, walked all the way down to the first floor, got in the car, drove back here. You dropped me off and, I assume, you went home." Mulder had leaned forward again and was now looking blankly at the office door, Scully's small form close in his peripheral vision. "You were here when I got in this morning," she continued. "We were called up to Lark's office where we gave a full report. You said you'd come to the conclusion that the Body Snatcher case wasn't an X-File and had no relation to the old X-File, as you'd thought. Lark assigned Jenning and Holt to the case and told us to move on."

"That can't be true," Mulder muttered, grabbing hold of Scully's elbow to reassure her he wasn't calling her a liar. "I mean, both your story and mine can't be true." He leaned back again and looked up into intensely unhappy blue eyes. "What's going on?"

Scully pulled gently from his grip and crouched down beside his chair, looking at him sympathetically. "I don't know."

They both started as the office door opened, and both gasped when they saw who had stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"What the fuck...?"

"My thought exactly," Mulder muttered, rising and moving to stand in front of the man

who had just spoken. "Amazing..."

"Just like that episode of STAR TREK..."

Fox smiled. "Yeah, I get dibs on the good Kirk."

Scully rolled her eyes as she moved toward the two men, circling them slowly, looking them both over inch by inch, finally coming to a stop beside them. "You're identical," she whispered.

Fox took a step back, almost stumbling on legs gone weak with fever and shock. A strong hand – identical to his own – reached out and steadied him. The touch brought a strike of lightning with it, an electric jolt that was so intensely energizing he couldn't breathe. An overwhelming wave of dizziness swept him and he was grabbed by another identical hand.

"Let go," he insisted softly, unable to find his voice, knowing only that his brain was overloading. "Let go... now," he added hoarsely, trying futilely to pry the hands from his arms.

"Let go of him!" Scully agreed, pushing the strong hands from Fox's arms, helping him back to his chair once the connection had been released. "You okay?" she asked, again feeling his forehead and cheeks. "Fox?" It was automatic to suddenly think of this drained man by a name she rarely used.

After a moment, Fox managed to nod that he was fine. He drew a deep breath and looked up to the other man again, finding the odd sight of looking at himself across the room slightly less shocking but no less disorienting.

The other 'him' looked just as shocked, just as confused, but not physically damaged by the bizarre situation. "Who *are* you?" the newcomer asked, leaning against the door, the pallor of his handsome face the only real visible sign of his shock.

"Fox, he's you," Scully answered, glancing over her shoulder to the man sitting at the desk. "And you're him," her eyes swivelled back toward the door.

The look Fox gave her was anything but trusting; the rare role of skeptic firmly in place. He shook his head, his eyes returning compulsively back to his duplicate.

"Not possible," Mulder said, his voice clearly intoning his lack of conviction.

"No," Fox agreed, "it's not."

"But it's the truth," Scully told them. "This," she gestured first at one man then the other, "is real."

"She's right. We both know that."

Mulder nodded reluctantly. "But... *how*?"

"It has to be connected to whatever you found on the fifth floor of the warehouse last

night," Scully told Fox. "Think. What was it?"

"A mirror," Mulder answered from the doorway, obviously surprised that he had an answer.

Both other sets of eyes turned toward him.

"I don't remember...," Fox began, then stopped. "Of course! There was a mirror there, Scully. A huge, badly silvered mirror. I..."

"I went closer to it to see what it was," Mulder interrupted, eyes rooted to his double. "It was like being swept along in a gentle tide; you don't realize you're moving against your will until you're swept too far from shore." He paused, pushing away from the door to stand up straight, long legs placed apart in a kind of rebellious 'at ease' stance. "It was..."

"Enthralling," Fox interrupted smoothly. "I was hypnotized by the damned thing. It was so beautiful. There were these carvings..."

"...around the frame. Identical images. Really erotic, weird," Mulder finished.

"My God," Scully murmured, now leaning on the desk once more, eyes darting back and forth between the two men. In her mind, she could see the mirror, the hulking frame. Figures danced before her mind's eye, entwined, identical. "This is what happened to all those people." When both men looked at her blankly, she added, "The Body Snatcher case. You know, the case we're... we were working on? The one with all the people disappearing for long periods of time only to reappear with personality changes? Remember?"

"Of course," both men chorused.

"But this doesn't explain the Body Snatchings," Fox insisted, voice soft, as though it was a huge effort for him to speak. "There's two of us now."

"*Now*," Mulder agreed. "But you're not well." He spoke insinuatingly, the same tone of voice he always used when explaining an X-File to Scully when she was at her 'I'll-believe-it-when-you-show-me-physical-proof' best.

"It's just the flu," Scully offered almost hopefully.

Mulder shook his head, moving closer to the desk. "No, it's not the flu. Is it?" he asked his twin.

Fox shook his head. "You're wrong."

"I'm right."

"No," Fox insisted, his expression negating his protest.

"Yes," Mulder said. "I'm right."

"About what?" Scully interrupted impatiently.

"He's dying," Mulder said, his voice hoarse, strained. "I can feel it."

"And you're growing stronger," Fox added. "*I* can feel that."

"You're both crazy," Scully began, then shook her head. "This entire *thing* is crazy."

"You're thinking this is another Baptiste case, aren't you?" Fox asked Mulder.

Scully gave up trying to get an answer out of either man and dug around on Fox's desk until she found the Baptiste file. Opening the manilla folder, she read: "'February 4, 1962, Superstition, Louisiana.'" She paused. "It figures," she offered, then continued to read: "'Seven disappearances of locals in and around the village of Superstition first reported by Claude Baptiste. All seven people reappeared within ten days, displaying marked personality alterations. These alterations were consistent in all seven individuals, namely an increase of physical strength, an increase in applied intelligence and manual skills, a calmness of spirit and of mind.'" She stopped, glancing at two sets of identical eyes as they both watched her. Scully's gaze settled on Mulder.

"That sound familiar to you, Scully?" Mulder asked, then spoke directly to his double. "This morning, Scully was remarking on how 'together' I seemed, how organized and alert I looked."

"You're suggesting," Fox said quietly, "that those seven people were like you? A... what? A reflection in a mirror?" he sounded incredulous, as though he wanted one of them to tell him he was crazy, but the look on his pale face spoke louder than his words, and displayed his sick belief that he'd just spoken the truth.

"And the... originals," Scully added, "become sick and die?"

Mulder shrugged. "We can only speculate on what happened to those seven people. What we have to deal with is the immediate danger to..." He paused as though unsure how to phrase his next statement. "*He's* what's important right now," he finally concluded, nodding toward Fox.

"Shouldn't that be 'we', Kimosabe?" Fox asked with a weak smile.

"I'm not the one who looks like I'm trying my best to impersonate a ghost, Tonto," Mulder told him. "You look like hell."

"I *feel* like hell."

"Maybe you should rest a while," Scully suggested.

Fox shook his head. "And wake up dead? No thanks. I think I'll stick around until we figure this out. Speaking of which," he said, levering himself with difficulty to his feet, "maybe we should get out of here before someone sees us." He stood on wobbling legs, leaning heavily on his desk.

Mulder moved to his side, hesitantly wrapping a supporting arm around his waist. It was like lightning again, although this time the fire wasn't as overwhelming, wasn't as frightening. Fox seemed to inflate before their eyes, standing straighter, paleness decreas-

ing, eyes brightening.

"Wow," Fox muttered, looking into the eyes that were so close, so much like his own. "Thanks," he added with a smile, voice more normal, strong.

"Don't mention it," Mulder said, returning the smile bend-for-bend.

"Interesting...," Scully observed, moving to Fox's other side and moving him away from Mulder. "Can you make it on your own to the car?"

"I can now," Fox assured her, squeezing her shoulder before moving out of her supporting embrace. He turned to his double. "Meet us at my... our apartment," he said with a smile. "This is *really* weird."

Mulder nodded, standing out of view as Scully opened the door and ushered Fox out. Before she closed the door, she looked back into the office. "He needs me. I mean..."

Mulder nodded. "Thanks, Scully."

Her smile was a bit shaky but no less sincere for it.

▯▯▯▯▯

The ride to the apartment drained Fox to the point that Scully could barely get him inside. She placed her burden on the nearest flat surface — the sofa —. and hurried to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

"Thanks," Fox whispered as she held the glass to his lips. "Scully," he added, his gaze dull and listless.

"I'm right here," she told him, sitting beside him on the sofa and easing his head onto her shoulder. "It'll be fine as soon as... he gets here."

A very weak smile graced Fox's handsome face. "Doesn't matter," he told her. "It's going to happen anyway."

"No!" she insisted, both arms wrapping around the hot body, hugging tightly. "No," she added more calmly, all the certainty and stubbornness she'd ever possessed focussed on her partner.

Fox couldn't answer her, didn't really want to. All he wanted was to slip into the lush emptiness that was beckoning him, urging him toward it as strongly as he'd been pulled toward that cursed mirror that had caused all this in the first place.

"Fox!" Scully snapped, shaking him sharply.

"Wa...?"

"Don't go to sleep," she insisted. "Tell me about... your sister. Tell me what happened to her."

Fox swallowed thickly, accepting another sip of water when it was offered. "Sister... taken away," he said, his speech slurred.

"When was she taken away?" Scully asked.

"Long time ago. Were kids."

"Tell me about that night," she insisted. "Tell me who took her away."

"Couldn't help," Fox said, grief now in his voice, invading through his broken defenses as though they'd never existed. "They took her... left me... find her."

"Who took her?"

"Youfoe," he insisted. "Youfoe took her. No one believed..." His voice was panicked, though ragged and limp around the edges.

"Shhh," Scully soothed, pushing damp hair off his high forehead, catching fever tears on her fingers. "*I* believe you. How will you find her, Fox?" she asked, purposefully using his first name again, marking a delineation between this man and his duplicate. "How?"

"Be a cop," he said softly, the panic gone from his voice, replaced by a vague imitation of his usual determination. "Effbeeye agent."

Scully smiled. "So you became an FBI agent to find your sister?"

"Find her..."

Just then, the door opened and Mulder stepped inside, eyes instantly moving to the scene on the sofa.

"Hurry," Scully whispered.

He moved without pause toward them, almost yanking Fox out of Scully's arms, wrapping his own arms around the diminished form. Autonomic function took over and Mulder soothed the version of himself he held in a fierce embrace, murmuring reassurances, wiping sweat from the trembling body, massaging cramped arm and shoulder muscles, kissing away the tears.

Scully had moved away from the couch, hovering near but not wanting to intrude. The sight was almost too intimate to watch as Mulder nurtured and fed himself unconditional love. The thought tickled the back of her mind, setting synapses in motion, instigating a vague theory. She let it perk, purposefully drawing her attention back to the scene on the sofa.

Slowly, the sick body healed before her eyes. First the trembling disappeared, then the tears, then all signs of fever. Finally, two perfectly matching men sat side by side, arms still wrapped around each other. If they hadn't been dressed differently and she didn't know better, she never would have been able to tell which was which; who had been looking through Death's porthole only moments earlier. The brewing theory moved closer to the surface of her mind.

"Better?" Mulder asked gently, again soothing damp hair from the cooled brow.

"Much, thanks," Fox replied. "Guess this means we can't take those separate vacations, huh?" he teased, voice now a perfect echo of the one that answered.

"Guess not," Mulder agreed.

"It's hard to tell which of you is which," Scully said, laying the ground work for the idea that was steadily moving to completion in her mind.

"Which is the original...," Mulder began.

"And which is Memorex," Fox finished, joining the man beside him in laughter.

Scully smiled at them, unable to tear her gaze away from the remarkable sight. Special Agent Fox Mulder might be weird, might be 'Spooky' Mulder to most of the FBI, but he was also an incredibly beautiful man. It wasn't that Scully had never noticed, but it was impossible to sublimate the observation when faced with all that beauty in duplicate.

"Well, if we're going to be spending the rest of our lives as Siamese twins," Mulder said with a resigned sigh, "what are we going to call each other?"

"Well, Scully suddenly thinks I'm 'Fox' and you're 'Mulder'," Fox observed fondly. "I suppose we could call each other 'brother'..."

Mulder smiled briefly. "More importantly," he asked, "how are we going to *explain* each other?"

Fox continued to smile, tightening the arm he had across the other man's chest. He leaned his head on the nearest shoulder and echoed Mulder's sigh. "You're being terribly optimistic, aren't you? I mean, we *can't* explain each other, can we?"

"We could..."

"What?" Fox insisted, a crooked grin dispelling the weight of his words. "One of us is a long-lost identical twin who has to remain at the other's side twenty-four hours a day? Or better yet, we could go to our supervisor. I can just hear it: 'Mr. Lark, you may think you know who I am, but I'm not Fox Mulder – well, actually, I *am* Fox Mulder, only not quite. That is, sir, I'm the *duplicate* Fox Mulder. Where's the original? I could be him, sir. We're not sure who's who anymore.'"

Mulder laughed. "Yeah, it would be kind of hard to explain. But what else can we do?"

Fox looked at him, examining the face that was so familiar yet so unfamiliar from this odd angle; so close, a reflection that wasn't quite a reflection. "You can live the life I've always lived."

"What about you?" Mulder asked, the look in his eyes begging Fox to say something other than what he knew he was going to say.

"I'm going to die," Fox told him softly.

"No!"

Both men turned toward Scully, having all but forgotten her presence.

"Dana," Fox said, a sound of despair, a plea for understanding.

"No," she repeated. "You're not going to die."

"Okay, *Doctor* Scully," Fox said seriously, invoking Scully's medical knowledge. "What's your professional take on this? I just nearly died in your arms and you're denying..."

"I'm denying nothing," Scully told him firmly, reasonably. "But neither am I willing to accept that you're just going to die if he's not with you all the time." She nodded toward the man who held him. "And what about him? Is he supposed to pick up your life where you left off, forget you ever existed? Is that fair to either of you? No," she said with a firm shake of her head. "I'm just not ready to admit defeat."

Mulder tightened his grip on his double. "You've got something in mind," he said to Scully, his characteristic grin – the one that made him look like a twelve year old who'd just found his daddy's girlie magazines – playing over his face, quickly echoed on the face still resting against his shoulder.

Scully sat on the coffee table inches from the sofa, her knees brushing Fox's. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, and stared down at her entwined fingers. "I *may* have a theory... an idea of how to go about bringing you together." She looked up at the twin faces, barely hiding an embarrassed, mischievous grin. "It's going to sound... weird, even... kinky," she said quickly, unable to repress a nervous laugh at the look on their faces. "Well, look at yourselves! What do you think I'm thinking?"

The men's eyes met, an almost visible communication arching between them. Fox took in their position – wrapped around each other like frightened two-year olds... or lovers. He blushed as what Scully was thinking hit him and met his twin's eyes again. The other man looked utterly calm, accepting, and definitely *not* embarrassed.

"Your duality's showing," Scully told them, glad to see visible proof of her idea.

"Now wait a minute...," Fox began, only to be interrupted by a carbon-copy of his own hand caressing his thigh. His fingers reached to dislodge the grip but, when their hands touched, Mulder captured Fox's hand and mingled their fingers, squeezing reassuringly.

Addressing Scully, Mulder spoke calmly, "You're thinking of combining our DNA," he told her, eyes sparkling with possibilities. "It seems like I've gotten all the... what, strength? While he's retained the..."

"Weaknesses," Fox finished.

"In some ways, yes," Scully agreed. "But it seems to be a *physical* demarkation with you," she nodded to Mulder, "having the dominant genes and Fox having the recessive

genes."

"It can't be that simple," Fox protested, looking from his partner to his double. "Can it?"

"Maybe," Scully told them firmly. "But I don't think we have time to research this, so we'll have to wing it."

"You?" Mulder asked. "Really, Doctor."

"Don't be a smartass," Scully chided him, patting both men on the knee as she rose and started pacing back and forth across the living room, looking utterly distracted in thought.

"Did you hear the way she spoke to me?" Mulder asked Fox, grinning.

"Does it all the time," Fox informed him with a shrug. "No respect."

Scully stopped, hands on slim hips, gracing each man with his own, specially loaded look. "I *could* just leave you here, you know," she threatened hollowly. "Or turn you in. The Bureau would love you two."

Both men sat up straight at the same time, innocent, attentive expressions parking on their faces.

Scully rolled her eyes and took up pacing again. "Ingesting genetic material might do the trick," she said to herself and whoever wanted to listen. "What *would* happen if..." She shook her head, hands steepled in front of her face, fingers tapping pursed lips. "God I wish I had access to a lab!"

"We could go back to the office, pass off some lab work as part of a case..." It was Mulder's suggestion and he was already shaking his head in the negative as Scully turned toward them. "Bad idea," he said apologetically.

"Glad you spoke first, I was going to suggest the same thing," Fox murmured.

"That's not surprising," Scully said off-handedly. "You're two parts of one person, it's to be expected that you're thinking almost alike, if not exactly." She stopped pacing to lean against a bookcase, arms folded across her chest, eyes fixed on the two figures on the sofa.

"Feel like a bug?" Mulder asked.

"A very large, newly discovered, iridescent bug," Fox agreed.

Ignoring them, Scully said, "The effect could *possibly* be achieved through sexual contact."

Two pairs of grey eyes grew slightly wider before turning on one another.

"Did she say what I think she said?" Fox asked.

"I'm pretty sure she did," Mulder answered as they both turned back to Scully.

"It's like watching Heckle and Jeckle," she muttered to herself. "I told you this might sound kinky," she defended.

"Yeah, but... kinky's one thing, this..."

"Actually it wouldn't be too different from masturbation, if you think about it," Mulder finished the thought. That shut Fox up.

"Exactly," Scully agreed, feeling her cheeks heat in an odd combination of embarrassment and arousal. "Uh..." She cleared her throat. "Unless either of you have a better idea?"

Again the identical eyes met and slowly pulled away. "You said ingesting genetic material...," Mulder began leadingly.

"So does that mean," Fox said quietly, "swallowing... I mean, would... Would *that* work?"

"I don't know," Scully answered honestly. "I was thinking of a... different mode of transmission."

"Oh." The sound was echoed in stereo from the sofa.

Scully moved back to the coffee table, leaning forward, catching each man's eyes before continuing. "Look, I know this is awkward... embarrassing. If I could think of any other way..." She shrugged.

"Do you think...," Fox began, pausing as though refocussing his thoughts. "Do you think there's any hurry? If we stay close, I mean."

"Other than the fact that we have a life to live," Mulder told him, "I don't see why we can't sleep on it... so to speak." The last three words earned him is own sharp elbow in his ribs.

Trying to hide a grin, Scully said, "I don't see why it can't wait. But not too long. We don't know what will happen to you," she told Fox, "given time."

He smiled, reached out a hand and she took it.

"Not too long," Mulder agreed. "But, in the meantime, what about the case? What about the mirror? If it's where we last... encountered it, anyone can come across it and..."

"Lose themselves," Fox finished.

"But what can we do about it?" Scully asked. "If someone approaches it... We don't know how it works. It could nab the next person – FBI agent or not – who comes near it."

"It wouldn't harm either of us," Fox told his twin. "I mean, it's done it's thing, right?"

"What makes you think it wouldn't make four of you?" Scully asked.

"No," Mulder answered, obviously following his double's thoughts. "It split us into dominant and recessive, right? It has nothing left to grab on to with us."

Scully looked skeptical.

"We have to try," Fox agreed.

"I'm going to call it in," Scully said as she moved toward the phone. "We better have the warehouse cordoned off before someone else bumps into that thing."

Mulder looked at Fox, pushing long bangs off the high forehead in what was becoming a habit of affection. When he caught his twin's eyes, he grinned, shaking his head. "It's almost as though I can hear your thoughts," he said softly, "but I'm really just hearing my own and seeing them move across your face, through your eyes."

"I know," Fox agreed, laying his head on the comfortable shoulder once more. "I'm trying not to think about this too much."

"Me, too." Then he added, "Don't let me forget the..."

"...sledge hammer when we leave," Fox finished. "I won't."

"It's a shame to have to destroy it."

"What choice do we have?"

"None."

"Okay," Scully said as she came back into the room. "The area's cordoned off." She paused to smile at her friend. "Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah," Fox answered, the word coming out more a sigh than an actual syllable.

"Hey," Mulder said into Fox's hair, kissing whatever was closest to his lips. "I won't let go of you," he assured.

"One of us better disguise himself then," Fox said with a light laugh he obviously didn't feel.

Scully was rooting through a closet almost before Fox had spoken. "Here," she said, holding out Fox's Bureau-issue rain coat and a Bogie-style hat. "Good thing the weather's bad."

Hesitantly, Fox got to his feet, letting his hand drop from Mulder's grip only at the last second. He shrugged into the overcoat, flipped up the collar and pulled the hat down as far as it would go, trying to cover his face.

"These will help," Scully said, holding out a pair of Ray-Bans.

"Not much," Mulder observed, circling Fox, then standing beside him, looking at Scully. "Not a very good disguise."

"It's the best we've got," she said, nodding approval. "Now are we ready?"

"As ready as we'll ever be," the doppelgangers echoed.

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Scully pulled up to the roadblock, identifying herself. They were passed through without question and Scully allowed herself a quick glance in the rearview mirror where she could see two heads turned toward one another, one wearing a hat, the other not.

"We're through," she told them unnecessarily, stopping the car in front of the warehouse.

Once more, Scully flashed her ID and they were allowed inside the building without delay. As they moved toward the stairwell, Fox removed his hat and took the hand Mulder offered him, smiling in gratitude as his body visibly revived from the brief time without physical contact.

They climbed the stairs in silence, Scully leading the way, Mulder following, his left hand behind his back allowing Fox to hang on as he brought up the rear.

Scully was just reaching for the door on the fifth floor landing when Mulder reached out with the hand holding the large hammer and nudged her hand away. "You stay here. Don't come through the door. For anything. Okay?"

Reluctantly, she stepped aside. "Just make it quick," she told them.

"Don't worry," Fox said as he squeezed her shoulder with his free hand. "I don't think either of us wants to be near that thing any longer than necessary."

With one last parting smile of reassurance, Mulder opened the stairwell door and pulled Fox through behind him.

Inside, the expanse of the warehouse loft seemed infinite. Both men halted just inside, sparing each other wry grins before starting out across the huge open space toward a far, shadow-obscured corner.

It stood before them like a doorway to hell; innocent, even attractive in appearance but hiding an unspeakable darkness. Mulder circled the thing, finally letting go of Fox's hand as he hefted the sledge hammer in preparation to strike.

"Wait," Fox told him, moving closer to the mirror.

"Don't challenge the damn thing," Mulder told him. "It could still have a few surprises we aren't immune to."

Fox nodded, already showing signs of weariness. Determination on his face, he stepped even closer to the mirror, examining the intricately carved wooden frame.

"There's something there... looks almost like Latin."

Mulder moved up beside him, squinting through the filtered light from the painted-over windows. "Yeah," he said. "I'll try to save the frame."

"No," Fox told him, "we don't know if it's the glass or the wood... or even the words that's the danger. Get rid of all of it."

Mulder gently pushed Fox out of the way and swung the heavy hammer upward toward the poorly silvered surface. The sound of shattering glass was startling, even though they'd both been prepared for it. To Fox, it sounded like a billion angels screaming in terror as glass was stripped from wood. Then the glitter hit the floor and the clatter was more like thousands of intricate chandeliers hitting pavement. The sound stung his ears and bit at his eyes.

"You okay?" Mulder called, having to raise his voice over the unproportionate din.

Fox opened eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed and looked at his double, nodding that he was fine.

Again, Mulder hefted the sledge hammer and swung, this time contacting the wooden frame. The wood split but didn't part so he swung again, and again until all that remained was s fine coat of slivers on the glass-spattered floor.

A reverberation ran from the floor up through Fox's legs and he trembled as his knees threatened to give way. Mulder's hand under his elbow steadied him and took away the dizziness that was again trying to claim him. He looked into identical eyes and saw worry there, and affection, and determination. And, possibly, even some regret.

Pulling gently away from Mulder's touch, Fox bent to pick up a sliver of mirror. Looking into it, he only saw darkness, not even a segment of his own reflection came back to him. He tossed the shard back down and stood up.

"This should all be burned," he noted, brushing his hands on his raincoat.

Mulder nodded. "It should be safe to have someone sweep this mess up and toss it in the nearest incinerator."

Fox looked at him. "You know that could have been our only way back," he said softly, knowing the other man would understand.

But Mulder shook his head. "No. There were no answers here."

"I almost expected one of us to disintegrate when you shattered the mirror." He smiled self-deprecatingly. "Part of me is glad that didn't happen." He shrugged an apology. "Another part is disappointed."

"Well, just don't go using up too many more parts. You don't have as many as you used to, you know."

Grateful for the sick humor, Fox laughed softly, moving back to Mulder's side and

taking his hand again. Instantly, he stood straighter, sounded stronger. "Let's go. Scully's probably on her last fingernail by now."

Mulder let himself be pulled along by the hand, holding the stairwell door open for Scully to look through. "All gone," he told her. "But we have to send someone up here to clean up, burn what's left."

Scully nodded, squinting through the large, gloomy space to see little glints of ice on the floor. Satisfied that their task was finished, she turned back to the stairs and descended.

Once more in the street, Scully left the two men briefly to speak to another agent, joining them at the car within minutes. "Everything's taken care of," she told them as she started the car. "Freed's going to clean up himself. I told him to be sure to get every speck and to burn it all immediately."

"Good," the back seat occupants echoed.

Scully heard the note of depression in both voices and thought it better not to ask.

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"So, I'll see... you in the morning," Scully said stiffly as she let them off in front of Mulder's apartment, obviously unsure of how to handle the situation. Was she wanted, needed tonight? Would she be in the way? Would her presence make an impossible situation all the more untenable? On the other hand, she didn't want to desert her partner... partners and she wasn't sure *she* was ready to say good-bye to one of them just yet.

Fox leaned in the passenger side window as Mulder stood beside him. "We wouldn't mind you coming in with us," he told her evenly. "The sofa's not too bad to sleep on and... well...," he glanced up at his double, "we're not sure what's going to happen and..."

"I don't want to make it harder for you...," she told them. "But if you... need me..." She shrugged.

"Come on," Fox told her with a grin. "If you can deal with the inevitable embarrassment, so can we."

She returned his smile, rolling up the windows, turning off the car and locking it before telling them, "I never said I could deal with any of this. I just don't want to desert you. If you're sure you need me, that is."

Mulder leaned down and whispered in her ear, "We need you, Dana."

She smiled, rubbed at her ear where it tickled from his breath and followed them back into the apartment.

She was getting used to the odd sight of them next to each other, even the sight of them constantly holding hands seemed almost normal to her. It was the look in Mulder's eyes that caused her to question her own ability to simply wait for them to do whatever it

was they were going to do. She blushed even as the thought crossed privately through her mind.

Determined to make things as easy as she could for them, Scully moved into the kitchen and put up a pot of coffee, puttering around, making herself efficiently do absolutely nothing. She heard a door click shut and sighed, glad they'd taken her opening to slip off quietly. Now all she had to do was find a way to keep her mind off of what she knew would be happening only yards from her behind that closed door. She sighed, thinking that she'd never set herself a more difficult task in her life.

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Mulder had taken Scully's disappearance into the kitchen as a sign for them to make their move. He'd pulled at the hand he held and guided his duplicate into their bedroom, shutting the door – and the world – outside.

Fox looked skeptical, nervous, even embarrassed, and Mulder knew that it would be up to him to make things happen. Without a word, he undressed, calmly placing his clothes neatly on the overstuffed chair in the corner. When he was naked, he looked up and found Fox's eyes on him, examining him as though looking for something unfamiliar.

"Nothing you haven't seen before," Mulder told him with a gentle smile. "Nothing *I* haven't seen before," he added, tilting his head invitingly. "Want help?"

Fox shook his head, turning so that he was sideways on to the other man. Efficiently, he stripped off his suit, shirt, tie and loafers, placing them just as neatly on the chair as Mulder had placed his clothes. Then he stood up, facing his mirror image, unable to take a single step toward that other, overly-familiar body.

Shaking his head, Mulder said, "There's nothing to be afraid of. It's not like you're making it with another man or something."

Fox's brow crinkled at the twisted logic of that statement then smiled when he saw the wicked grin on that other face. "You really *are* a very strange person, you know that?"

"Right back atchya," Mulder told him as he slowly stalked his twin, stopping when he was just barely in reach of that tall, lanky form. He reached out a hand and let his fingertips settle in the middle of Fox's chest, running a two-fingered line down the sternum, stopping on the flat, hard belly. "This is going to sound horribly egocentric," he said as he took another step closer, "but you're really beautiful."

Fox smiled widely at that. "You really did get all the dominant genes, didn't you?"

"If I waited for you, we'd be like this forever," Mulder told him. "You really did get all the recessive genes, didn't you?" he echoed with that same wicked grin.

"That's *recessive*," Fox reminded him as long arms wrapped around his back, bringing them naked front to naked front, "not *submissive*."

Mulder laughed, deep and suggestive, then leaned forward until their lips touched. Both men left their eyes open, watching for any reaction. The kiss was repeated, twin

smiles bloomed on twin faces, and both men moved as one back into a lingering kiss, deeper and definitely less innocent than the first ones. Lips parted and tongues explored, finding tastes and textures so well known they almost didn't register as being outside themselves.

To Fox, it seemed like kissing himself. Then he realized that was exactly what it was and all tension drained from him, leaving him comfortable, confident, even courageous in his own embrace. His arms tightened around the long back, his hands enjoying the touch of skin normally beyond his reach. It was the skin of a man well-protected from the environment, well concealed from the world, and he ran his fingers up and down the subliminal bumps of spinal column, finally resting on the gentle swell of buttocks. He laughed into his double's mouth and broke the deep kiss.

"Wow," Mulder gasped into his hair, tugging at strands of lush brown with his lips. "This narcissism stuff isn't too bad, huh?"

Fox continued to laugh, his hands exploring the mounds of flesh they held, dipping in and out of curves and impressions, tickling the fine hair on Mulder's thighs. It was such an odd feeling, being the exact same height as his lover, knowing he tasted as familiar to the man in his arms as Mulder tasted to him, understanding without words exactly what his twin wanted, desired, found most arousing. The duality of it all was stunning, the visceral reality of it almost too much to consider. His mind was beginning to cramp.

"This will either work or it won't," Mulder told him quietly, still nuzzling his ear. "Either way, we have to try, don't you think?"

Fox pulled away from the embrace just enough to look into duplicate eyes. "Hey, I'm not objecting to any of this. Are you...?"

Mulder placed long fingers across Fox's lips to silence him. "I'm not objecting either. It seemed you needed some reassurance, that's all. Stop thinking so much. Just let go. Let yourself enjoy this."

Fox nodded, eyes flickering over the face so close to his own. He'd never noticed how full his lips were, how kissable they seemed; a perpetual pout that gave him a ridiculously youthful appearance. And he'd never seen his own eyes so full of lust, so full of the desire to please someone else. It was a humbling experience to study his own face without the distortion of mirror or photograph.

"I said," Mulder said softly, kissing Fox's mouth, "stop thinking so much."

"Whatever you say," Fox muttered into his lover's mouth, finally able to follow instructions and shut down his analytical processes long enough to wallow in the tactile.

Though a long time between lovers, their memories were strong, especially muscle memory, so when kisses became too hot to ignore the rest of their bodies, it was only natural for each of them to reach for the other's engorging flesh, natural to take cock in hand just so and manipulate it like this... and like that. Without conscious thought, long-fingered hands moved in syncopation between close-pressed bellies, maneuvering excited erections into contact until they snuggled like two kittens against a cold, harsh world. Hands slipped free of the cozy bed their bodies made, leaving the hard lengths to entice

each other on their own. Slick with excitement, driven by long-ignored need and the not-so-simple eroticism of the situation, they rubbed against one another until arousal and pain were almost inseparable. Knowing how to make things alright once more, Mulder thrust just so against Fox, then froze as they both found completion.

Panting, feeling Fox leaning almost fully against him, Mulder slowly eased them onto the near-by bed, stretching out alongside his double, holding him close, legs wrapped around Fox's legs, arms crossed around Fox's back. It took long minutes for their breathing to return to something resembling normal. And only then did Fox open his eyes to find Mulder's already on him.

"That was..."

"Wasteful," Mulder finished. "I know."

"But nice," Fox insisted with a shy grin.

"*Very* nice," Mulder agreed, hugging him, leaning the short space necessary to kiss him deeply, wetly. "But unproductive."

Fox laughed tiredly. "You sound like we're trying to get pregnant."

Mulder shared his humor. "In a way, I think we are."

Fox's amusement faded slowly and he finally nodded. "I guess you're right. Two trying to make one, that sort of thing."

They lay quietly together for a few minutes, hands moving occasionally to be reassured of the other's continued presence. When they parted once more, it was without words, though not without knowledge of each other's wishes, each other's needs. Each touch was the exact touch desired, each movement perfectly orchestrated to achieve maximum arousal. Soon, they were humping against one another once more.

"Wait," Fox gasped even as his hips rocked forward again. "Don't waste it," he reminded, wiggling around so that his eyes were on a level with an exact copy of his own straining erection. "Weird," he muttered just before touching the weeping crown of Mulder's cock with his tongue. "Really weird."

The reverberation of laughter shared ran the length of Fox's body as Mulder's lips closed around the tip of his cock, sharing the unnatural perspective of sucking one's own penis. But such a lovely unnatural perspective it was.

Lips gave knowledgeable attention to inner thighs and testicles, tongues followed with precise touches and swaths, guaranteed to please. It was almost as though the two men were principles in a well-rehearsed ballet; the dance a masterpiece.

They teased each other, trying to draw out the pleasure, trying to make the most of what would probably be a once in a lifetime experience; a once in *any* lifetime experience. The sweetness of the moment, the simplicity of mouths on cocks, hands on buttocks, was so intense, so *real* that it seemed they'd been born solely for this moment, this never-to-be-repeated experience.

They licked and sucked and swallowed one another until flesh began to feel raw, until nerves were stretched to their limits, until Mulder snuck one lone finger into the tender opening of Fox's body. That one, unexpected touch was too much. Fox exploded in almost painful pulses, transmitting his essence deep within Mulder's throat. Within a heartbeat, the throbbing release caught Mulder and he, too, sent the heart of what he was on its way into his twin's body.

Exhausted, lips red from kisses and sucking, cocks raw from all the attention, they fell into a semi-sleep in which they held one another chest-to-chest, occasionally licking a shoulder or sharing a soul-ripping kiss, rolling gently against each other so that their tender organs danced irritably together.

They slept for a while, waking to find sleepy, tender smiles greeting them. Fox took Mulder's full lower lip between his teeth, scraping gently before releasing it and licking the roughness away.

"Look," he rasped, moving away from Mulder's chest to where their legs were intertwined.

"Oh my...," Mulder gasped as he followed Fox's gaze to where their feet seemed to be welded together. Flesh had swallowed flesh so that it looked as though, between them, they only had three feet; Mulder's left foot was completely encased within Fox's right.

"Now watch," Fox told him as he pulled his right foot back. Slowly, their bodies became two again and Fox smiled into wide, shocked eyes. "I woke up and just wanted to watch you sleep," he began self-consciously. He shrugged. "I wanted to look at you. That's when I saw your big toe seemed to have been swallowed by my instep." He laughed. "So I concentrated on absorbing the rest of your foot and... well, you saw."

Mulder's eyes had welled with moisture. He blinked and one tear escaped. Fox licked it off his cheek, fully understanding the tear was of wonder and amazement, not of sadness.

"Come here," Fox muttered, drawing Mulder deep into an embrace again, kissing him deeply and sweetly. "Come here," he repeated, spreading his legs and lifting his hips. "Now, concentrate," he insisted, his hips gyrating uncontrollably as lust swept over him, engulfing him in heat and need.

Mulder faltered, following Fox's thinking but shying away from the fact of what he was being asked to do.

"Every man's fantasy," Fox reminded him as he kissed Mulder's chest, biting quickly at a peaked nipple. "Suck yourself off, fuck yourself, not so uncommon a wet dream."

Mulder gasped as Fox's teeth grazed the other nipple and his hips rocked back and forth again. "Stop it," he whispered. "Hold still."

"No."

"If you want me to... concentrate then you'd better back off," Mulder warned.

Fox laughed and shook his head. "Next time," he said seductively and reached down to gather Mulder's hardened flesh in his hand, guiding it unerringly to the desired target. "Next time," he repeated as he urged Mulder into position. "Just do it this time. Just do it..."

Mulder was lost. The touch of relaxed muscle against the overly sensitive head of his cock was almost too much. He clamped down on the urge to simply come right then and there, bit his lip and gently shoved. The crown clicked past the initial resistance of Fox's muscle, causing them both to gasp and hold still. Then all was movement. Fox thrust upward, sucking nearly all of Mulder's length into his body. Then he rocked his hips backward, setting the pace in motion. Mulder needed no more urging after that and began a rapid-fire thrusting that soon had them both keening softly, grunting at impact and hissing at withdrawal.

It was like nothing either man could recall experiencing. The ultimate high. But at the same time as desire ran as high as it possibly could, comfort wasn't too far behind. It felt so safe in each other's arms, in each other's body. It felt so comfortable.

Fox was being touched in a way he'd never felt before, and it wasn't just the hard, lovely reality of Mulder's flesh touching the hypersensitive gland inside him. What truly touched him was his own soul riding itself, pulling and twisting and drilling itself until all secrets were revealed, all insecurities aired, all self-doubt and pain thrown naked into the light of an identical soul waiting with outstretched palms. Something deep inside him broke then and he came. The waves shook his body, leaving him helpless and weak as Mulder tensed over him, letting his body empty into the twin receptacle in long, searing spasms.

Gasping for breath now, Mulder collapsed on top of the identical body, his cock still held by tightened muscles, jerking with every movement of the body beneath him. His open mouth traced clumsy patterns on Fox's throat and shoulder, lips barely able to kiss, mind unable to think. He was one huge raw nerve settling into the most soothing of salves.

When the only sound in the room was the in-sync beating of two hearts, Fox finally let the organ slip from his body. A low moan half of protest, half of pleasure escaped Mulder as he slipped partially off the hot body beneath him. He raised is head just enough to look the length of their bodies and smiled to see the lower halves of their legs embedded within each other. Where there should have been four feet and four knees, there were only three of each. It was a decidedly abnormal, even disturbing sight, but none the less beautiful.

Fox followed his gaze and smiled into Mulder's shoulder. "We're getting the hang of it, I think."

Mulder nodded and settled back into their embrace. After a moment, he felt Fox wiggling beside him and again looked down to see their legs separating once more.

"Where you going?" Mulder asked as Fox sat up beside him.

"To get us something to drink."

Mulder let him almost get to the door before saying, "Scully's still out there."

Fox halted, glanced down at himself and shrugged.

"Don't do it," Mulder laughed. "Spare her the heart attack and put on a robe."

Fox frowned at him as he slipped into plush terry-cloth. "Heart attack?" he asked skeptically, unsure if he should be insulted or not.

"From all that sexy beauty," Mulder told him with a shy blush.

"Egotist," Fox accused, opening the door and carefully looking into the living room. He smiled over his shoulder at the man still in bed, took a step through the door and immediately collapsed.

Mulder was at his side in less than a second, cradling Fox's head in his naked lap, barely noticing Scully as she rushed to their sides, pulling her blouse straight around her.

"I'm okay," Fox insisted, sitting up but leaning against Mulder's bare chest anyway. "I'm fine," he repeated, smiling when he realized Mulder wasn't wearing anything. "Thought you were worried about Scully's heart," he muttered.

"What?" Mulder asked distractedly, pushing Fox's hair from his face. Suddenly it registered and he blushed, giving Scully a shy grin. "Nothing she hasn't seen before, I'm sure," he told Fox, still caressing his cheek.

"Oh my God..." Scully fell backward, sitting down hard, eyes staring at where Mulder's hand was rubbing Fox's face.

Both men looked to see what had shocked her and found Mulder's finger's melded into the flesh beside Fox's mouth. They both smiled.

"Neat, huh?" Fox asked Scully, taking Mulder's wrist and gently pulling until they were separated once more.

Scully just kept staring at them, scooting away a few more feet until her back hit a chair and she could go no further.

"I think you scared her," Fox told his twin.

"Me?"

"Who's the one without any clothes on?"

"Uh..." Mulder blushed again, recovering quickly. "Come with me so I can get a robe," he said as he pulled Fox to his feet. "Can't let you out of my sight for a second," he scolded teasingly.

They disappeared back into the bedroom, then reappeared moments later. Fox pulled Mulder over to stand in front of Scully, one hand reaching down to her.

She stared at it a long time before accepting the help, standing and only letting go of Fox's hand when she realized she was gripping it almost too tightly. She followed them into the kitchen where Fox poured all three some orange juice, leaving the pitcher handy for seconds. He then leaned comfortably against the other man, knowing they both reeked of sex and looked anything but platonic. Somehow, he wasn't embarrassed.

"When did... that start?" Scully asked, not looking at either man. "Sinking into each other like that, I mean."

Fox shrugged, standing up straighter but not relinquishing physical contact with his double. "About an hour ago, I guess. It was our feet the first time."

"It was pretty weird," Mulder agreed, "only three feet for two people." He shuddered but smiled while he took a deep drink of juice.

"The second time it was the entire lower half of our legs."

"Looked like we were joined at the knee," Mulder added, an arm draped over Fox's shoulder, the hand caressing Fox's neck.

A look of horror came over Scully's face again and Mulder looked down to see what had done it this time. His fingers were dipping in and out of the flesh of Fox's throat. He pulled his hand away and smiled. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Poor Scully," Fox said fondly. "A little too much has happened for someone who doesn't believe in this stuff, huh?"

"Yeah," she agreed, finally tearing her eyes away from Fox's throat to meet his eyes. She smiled warmly. "A little too much."

Suddenly, both men sobered and Fox stood even straighter, not quite pulling away from Mulder's touch. "It'll all be over soon enough," he said unhappily. "Strangely, that makes me really sad."

"It shouldn't," Scully told them. "You'll always be together. In a different way, sure, but you'll have a perspective no one else will ever have. To truly *know* yourself, to have... loved yourself so completely..." She shook her head, a wistful smile on her pretty face, her eyes glowing with emotion. "I envy you," she added softly.

Mulder's arm tightened around Fox. "She's right, brother. We'll never be alone again. Not now. Not after all this."

"One more thing to make us 'Spooky'," Fox said, still sounding unhappy but more accepting.

"That's never bothered us before," Mulder reminded.

"No," Fox agreed.

"I don't want to sound nosey or anything," Scully said, unable to hide a nervous smile. "But... about that genetic material theory... Did you first start to meld together before or

after an... exchange?" She looked up and met first one man's eyes, then the other's.

Both men laughed, glancing at each other. "After," they chorused.

Scully nodded, losing her fight with the grin. She took a sip of orange juice then started strolling back toward the living room. "I don't know about you two," she said, leaning her left side against the kitchen doorway, "but I'm going back to bed." She watched them for another long minute before disappearing around the corner.

"Shall we do as the doctor says?" Mulder asked, once more running his hand along the side of Fox's face, watching his fingers disappear unnaturally within the other man's flesh. "I think it's time," he added quietly, kissing Fox's cheek as he spoke.

Fox looked panicked for a moment, then nodded, taking his twin's hand and leading him back into the bedroom. He closed the door behind them and untied the sash at his waist, stretching out on the bed as Mulder did the same, moving rapidly, smoothly into his arms a moment later.

They held each other, building a slow fire that began as a spark and soon grew into an outright conflagration. They moved against one another, unable to touch enough, taste enough, *have* enough of one another until, finally, Mulder had Fox pinned beneath him. He licked a path from left nipple to right, then up and across the prominent collarbone to the long column of neck, up the sharp chin to full lips, further over cheekbone to a translucent eyelid. He drew a deep breath, as though drawing their combined, doubled scent into his memory, then maneuvered his legs between Fox's.

Looking down, Mulder was compelled to taste the body beneath him again, repeating the long swath of tongue while at the same time, spreading Fox's legs with his knees. When he had the other man positioned to his satisfaction, he reached down and cupped one buttock in his palm, urging Fox to tilt his hips, to let him in.

Willingly, Fox followed Mulder's urging until he was spread open, ready for this final, ultimate mating. He drew on all the reserves of bravery he could find within himself, knowing that most of that trait lived in the half of himself about to plunder his body so lovingly. The thought stoked the little spark of courage and he found himself calmed, most of his worry and part of his fear assuaged by the knowledge that Scully had spoken the truth when she said he and his lover would never be apart again. He found himself soothed... and insanely aroused.

"Now," Fox muttered, his hands grabbing at the other man's body, pulling him down, closer, needing to feel that knife's-edge pressure when his lover entered him, needing to be filled with that other body that was also his own. "Now..."

"Take it easy," Mulder muttered while leaning his hips in closer and closer to the waiting opening. He teased the quivering body beneath him, letting the tip of his cock taste the small, muscular mouth then dart away. He repeated the motion over and over until their nerves were screaming with need. "Tell me," he ordered softly. "Tell me what you need — what *we* need."

Fox's hands tightened on Mulder's sides, trying to draw him forward. Mulder allowed him a tiny success, just enough to let his cockhead snug up against the opening. He froze,

holding them both on the brim. "Tell me," he repeated, panting now, sweat dripping down his body.

"Come into me," Fox whispered. "Put us back together. Fix it, brother. Please." Tears coursed unnoticed down his face. "Please..."

And Mulder pressed forward, piercing the relaxed muscle, sliding deeply into the throbbing passage, slipping beyond their normal defenses, their usual safe-guards. He just let his weight carry him as far as he could go, feeling both planted and planter, dual sensations breaking over him like a wave.

"God...," someone muttered. "God... more..."

It was the hardest thing they could remember doing, but they managed to pull back from their own body's encasement, then again let their weight carry them back inside. Again, they repeated the slow withdrawal and slower insertion, not knowing who was who anymore, not caring. Out they forced their erection, then sighed as they sucked it back in. Over and over and over, the pace picking up after a million years, after a fraction of a moment. The friction was so good, so deep and hard that all else ceased to exist. Only the sensation of a hard body loving itself held any meaning.

They heard voices, distantly realized it was their own combined in exultation. They felt sun and rain, heat and blizzard. They saw the universe born and destroyed. And they sank into one another until their flesh was, literally, one. All their impressive intelligence was concentrated on one goal; the ultimate melding of two bodies into one in the inferno of orgasm.

When they came, it was with the power of the elements; a fine, thick rain of human essence showered down on the mass of flesh and nerve endings, blood and bone that writhed on the bed. When they came, they broke into thousands of tiny particles only to be reunited into a more familiar shape, a more familiar form than had ever before existed. The spasms went on and on until their body could take no more and lost its tenuous grip on reality.

▯▯▯▯▯

All was pain. Life was pain. Body was pain.

A sound distantly related to that a human might make whispered in the room. Vaguely, it was recognized as a mourning keen; the hushed tone of a soul in ultimate agony.

Then silence encased the universe again for a long, long while.

Fox Mulder moved. He regretted the act, but knew it was necessary. He repeated it again. And again. Until he stood on very shaky legs. Delicately, he made his way into the bathroom where he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Fascinated, he moved closer, leaning over the counter until his nose touched cold glass.

Mirror...

It all came back to him then: why he was in such pain, why he felt so empty yet in-

describably full at the same time, why he felt like he'd spent the last eon engulfed in the best sex that had ever transpired.

And he remembered Mulder, the disassociated part of himself... or had that been Fox? Did it even matter now? He couldn't think clearly, didn't want to think at all just yet. Pushing himself away from his own reflection, he brushed his teeth and took a quick shower before even thinking of quitting his bed permanently for the day. But once dressed, he felt a bit more himself and knew it was time to face his very patient, very sympathetically – and probably very embarrassed – partner.

He opened the bedroom door quietly, almost expecting to find himself sitting in the kitchen already. As he entered the living room, he wondered how long he'd do that – expect to see himself every time he looked up.

"Good morning," he croaked when he found Scully reading the morning paper over a cup of coffee. "Sleep well?"

Scully bent the paper in half horizontally and gave him an enigmatic look – obviously trying to hide her concern – before reaching for the coffee pot and pouring him a cup.

"Thanks," he muttered.

She watched him drink, obviously waiting for him to talk. When he didn't speak, she sighed. "Well?"

"Well what?" he asked automatically, then apologized when he met her eyes. "Sorry. Everything seems to be back to normal."

"Are you alright?"

"Don't know," he said resignedly. "We're confused," he offered. "A little depressed maybe."

Scully nodded understandingly. "You need some time. There's a lot for you to assimilate, even justify to yourself."

"What about you?" Mulder asked. "This must have been almost as weird for you as it was for us."

She noted his automatic use of the plural and wondered how long the odd speech pattern would last. "I can't even begin to guess what you've gone through. Watching it and... doing it are two very different things I think."

He smiled wryly. "Yeah, guess so."

"Why don't you take a few days off? I know you've got a huge back-log of sick days," Scully suggested.

"We're not sure it's such a good idea to be left on our own right now. It might be best not to think too much for a while, you know? Let it simmer before we start digging into it too deeply. Right now, we feel pretty raw."

Again, the strange use of the plural struck her and she was surprised at how right it sounded; most definitely odd, but not wrong. She nodded her understanding. "You want to go into the office today? We could tie up the Body Snatcher mess. And one of us should talk to Lark. Not to tell him about... all this, just to deal with the mess at the warehouse last night."

He nodded. "Why don't you go on home, freshen up. We'll pull ourself together then come by for you."

Scully stood, folding the newspaper properly and placing it beside her empty coffee cup. "Sure you'll be alright on your own?"

"We're a big boy, Scully. We can take care of ourself."

She smiled. "You're going to have to watch that," she told him.

"What?"

Her brow crinkled in a frown. "You keep referring to yourself as 'we'."

"We do?" he asked, eyes huge as he heard himself speak. "Wow, weird."

She just shook her head, adding this eccentricity to the long list her partner already had going. "Frankly, no one will really care too much. Spooky."

He threw a pot holder at her and she ducked, gathering up her shoes, jacket and purse and heading for the door. "See you in about an hour," she said before turning the handle. "Okay?"

"Okay." He gave her a reassuring smile, then added, "We'll see you then."

Rolling her eyes, Dana Scully left her partner's home, wondering what could possibly top the odd events of the past forty-eight hours then quickly reminding herself to be very careful what she asked for...

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: I would like to acknowledge my debt to Richard Christian Matheson's STAR TREK episode, "The Enemy Within".]

MIAMI VICE

TABOU

I am looking
at the light
shining through the murky filter
of my empty bottle of Lowenbrau.
A green as deep and secretive
as your eyes.

I turn the bottle
smooth and warm between my hands.
My heart quivers
thinking of your skin
golden like the beer.

I brush fingertips across the paper label
lightly, teasingly,
and think of
the rough and raspy timbre of your voice
the glitter of stubble on your chin
even the clear sheen of your nails
gleaming on elegant hands.

The Miami sun
sparkles on the glass
glints of palest gold
like the highlights in your hair.
I raise the rim to my lips
cool and firm and wet.

Your eyes meet mine
across the table.
You smile, slightly puzzled,
asking, what am I thinking of?
Oh, if you only knew!
The forbidden things
I'd like to say and do.

I drain my glass
and can't reply.
Despite the drink
my mouth is dry.

MIAMI VICE

SWEET SENSATION

by

Deveroux Dane



Like the tantalizing warmth of summer silk, the ocean breeze caressed his skin. He closed weary eyes. All the luscious details of a Miami spring morning assailed his senses. The scent of the water and distant flowers carried mingled in the rich air.

Opening his eyes he smiled still savoring the moment. The soft pale sand losing the cool of the night. The thin upper crust sparkling, crumbling with gathering warmth. Radiant light sharpening every contour. Tropical companion seeping heat and light into the hard exterior of his skin.

The mixture of soft cool sensations and pervasive warmth delighted him. He concentrated on feeling every inch of his exposed skin, resenting the snug barrier of his swimming trunks.

Gulls cried and small birds skittered across the retreating path of the waves. He walked out into the welcoming embrace of the sea.

The clear water supported him in her tireless acceptance and strength. In her he was free and powerful, graceful and hidden, like a lover beneath the sheets in a darkened room. He loved the concealing folds of water. He reveled in the feeling of gliding through the liquid, testing his strength against the matchless power of the sea. Here he needn't be controlled, contained, reserved, restrained. Here he was free to move and express himself like a dancer on the stage. It was his secret. His delight. His sanctuary.

His soul opened, his mind expanding to a clarity like the crystal water. No troubles, no pain and no dark secrets to keep and ponder. The black heart of the city was washed away like a child's nightmare is washed clean in the morning or the soft arms of a parent. He swam for almost an hour. Diving, twisting, touching bottom and springing upward to the rolling surface.

He lay on his back, floating in the smooth cool bed of water. Inevitably his conscious mind reasserted itself over his animal nature and thoughts of the world intruded. But this poisonous thought was fantasy. It was the sweet sensation that tugged at his dreaming mind. Once so instantly dissipated that he couldn't recall it on waking, this dream had become inescapable. It was draining him of what little peace he possessed and now it was intruding on his sanctuary...

Castillo struck out powerfully, swimming hard along the distant pale shore. For long vigorous moments he was able to clear his mind. But the sweet sensation of the sea with its salty taste and warm embrace inexorably drew his imagination inward to the dream. Salt was a man's sweat. The forbidden taste of tears and semen. The wet surge of the ocean's familiar rhythms rocked him in the dream's slow loving.

Power, liquid, motion and salt, conspired to lure his mind to thoughts of making love to a man. Something he'd never done. Never imagined. Never desired...

Again he floated, bravely confronting the persistent images. Instantly he recalled the image of the gold watch-band. In the dream he slid it up the aristocratic wrist and kissed the underside, tasting the pulse, hearing the gasp of in-drawn breath. But he was pulling the powerful body into his arms, like a man gathers a fallen comrade, like a brother embraces, like a lover enfolds. A gruff, startled voice protests with puzzled dismay. "Marty, what are you doing?" And it is Sonny's voice. Sonny's words. Not like a wishful dream would deliver up the object of desire, but as reality wakes a dreamer. Sonny compassionate and confused, not shoving him away, not laughing. Considerate and respectful and very concerned.

Dream lips demand with tenderness, touching unknown textures, capturing a familiar mouth.

"No, Marty. No."

But he insists and the gruff voice chokes on a plea, because a friendship is tearing at the seams and madness is suspected. Loss is in that voice. The body in his arms is shaking. His dreamself knows that for love Sonny will not push him away. For respect and for loyalty and the terrible pain of betrayal that he would do anything not to feel again, Sonny will let this play out. But he is in pain. His soul is tearing and his heart is pounding like the heart of a trapped cat. "God, don't do this to me, Marty." And he means don't make him push a friend away.

His dreamself knows the moment will come and pass where Sonny will fight. It will come and if he can hold him long enough, it will pass. Sonny Crockett is a passionate man. It won't be impossible to move him, manipulate this passionate nature into what he wants.

"Do you love me?" he asks Sonny.

The green eyes are tortured. "Man, don't ask that. You know I do, but not like this." There is no violent rejection, no sudden flare of resolve. The pain is too raw, and the shock too deep.

He doesn't respect this pain, this honesty. His dreamself leans forward like an executioner and claims the handsome mouth. He hears the gasp of soft denial, the prayer and the tears, but he uses hands and mouth and body to say, "Reject me or accept me, this way, now."

Sonny loves him. Loves him deeply with a trust that betrays him utterly. He yields, because he would rather die than reject a good friend.

Martin's clever dreamself knows this, has counted on it. And now he moves in to ignite the promising kindling.

In the water, in the gold revealing light, the dreamer is awake and standing in the chest-deep in the swaying water. For the first time since he was a boy, Castillo is immobilized in the waves by a powerful erection. His whole self is given to it and the release brought on purely by his memory and the cool strokes of the sea.

He is shaken and yet... The disturbing images still have the power to move him. His heart shudders with barely controlled possessiveness at his efforts to shove the dream away. His body answers in the same language as his subconscious, wanting what rationality desperately denies. And he wonders absurdly, how long he can stave it off. It's absurd to ever think of anything but shoving this persistent dream and the accompanying sensations into the deepest recesses of his mind.

Lately he'd begun questioning his sexuality, his rationality. He clung to old desires that he could no longer feel. The strength of this new obsession washed them into pale rags. He'd begun to ask himself if he'd ever loved May Ying, or if she was only a symbol of everything sweet, clean and decent in the uncivilized horror that had surrounded him in Cambodia. His attraction to Crockett felt the same, as if he were drawn to some shining inner light the detective harbored. From the beginning the man had shone, but that was just the undeniable evidence of charm and talent. One look was all it took for Castillo to sum the arrogant detective up as a man who'd outgrown his place. Sonny outshone his companions with a light that attracted many. Even Sonny's intelligence and arrogance couldn't see himself for what he really was. Castillo wasn't charmed as so many were, no that came later with respect for the detective's unique character. In his own way, Castillo waited for the day when Crockett would wake up to the fact that he no longer belonged where he was needed. He was made for finer things.

In all honesty Castillo had to face the troubling fact that he'd stayed long past his original commitment to fill in with the vice squad. It had never been anything but a simple cover, a resting place. But he was captivated by the courage and dauntless energy of the department. It was actually far more challenging than he thought. And there was this enigmatic and compelling man Sonny Crockett. Martin considered that maybe he'd stayed as long as he had purely for his unacknowledged attraction to Sonny. The dreams dragged the notion into the light, and would not let it sink back into the collection of fascination and fantasy that spawned it.

It was interesting to note that in his dream, Sonny remained true to his nature, while his own character was so wildly unrecognizable. He was so... unfettered. Always before his dreamself remained comfortably within the bounds of his personality and other people were so often altered by the unpredictable nature of dreaming.

He could still access the image of Sonny's confused acquiescence. His gentle warmth. The soft denial. Instead of waking his mind to more rational considerations, the thought still sent an electric signal of lust rushing to his groin.

Was it rational to picture it all, every lurid detail and still say with conviction, this could come true? But even now when he thought about it, his mind answered quite calmly: Sonny would do anything for you. But did he want such a sacrifice. No. And yes, yes, yes.

He shook his head to clear it and swam a little. It was time to go in and get ready for work. The sand had warmed and the eastern sky had lost its softness, the pink and silver giving way to blue and gold.

He took long strides across the sand, feeling the powdery heat give way beneath his bare feet. In a few hours it would be too hot to walk across and yet its surface would be covered by willing supplicants to the sun. They had no real appreciation for these cool deserted hours.

His sheltered home, with its Oriental gardens and hidden sophisticated security systems, welcomed him back. He put the kettle on for tea while he went in to shower and dress. His bathroom was a lavish affair, rugged stone, real ferns and rough timbers managed to look natural next to the frail rice-paper partitions. The tub was huge, sunk into the floor. It was deep black and surrounded by smooth stone. A raised ledge supported a traditional cedar Japanese tub fed by a rustic copper pipe. The shower was an open enclave of natural pink stone veined with delicate lines of silver. There was neither curtain nor door, but a partial wall of thick glass bricks that divided the shower from a small rock garden. The intimate rooms of the house wrapped around this little serene open space, an interesting mix of privacy and openness. This too reminded him suddenly of Sonny Crockett. He pushed the thought away.

Castillo considered the grim prospect of seeking help for this obsession. There was no one he could completely trust, not just with his career but with Sonny's and the integrity of his department. It was the isolation of his position and he knew it was the cause of more than one cop's mental break down. Was he vulnerable? He did not consider himself subject to emotional weakness, but then he'd never considered himself prone to homo-erotic fantasies. Perhaps there was a deeper, plainer, less exotic meaning to his dreams. Perhaps the erotic nature was merely a dream symbol. Perhaps the vision of Sonny was also just a symbol of something lurking in his subconscious.

Castillo got out of the shower, toweled himself dry and moved into the bedroom to dress. He chose a crisp white shirt and black silk tie. Staring at himself in the mirror as he dressed, he tried to consider his dreams with a ruthless self-examination. If his subconscious was filling his dreams with surfacing repressed thoughts and desires there had to be a reason. He analyzed the dream. In it he gave rein to a powerful need to seduce, to conquer with sensual and psychological persuasion. Yet there was nothing so shameful as violence, this was more disturbing in some ways due to the persuasive carnality and the ruthless betrayal of trust and power. There was something about the way Sonny protested but did not fight that was profoundly moving. Even in his pain, the detective did not break the ties of loyalty and affection.

Perhaps the dream just meant that his mind was trying acknowledge the depth of Crockett's allegiance. His subconscious could be mulling over feelings of isolation and knitting that together with physical and psychological sexual deprivation, tumbling thoughts of camaraderie, respect, intimacy with images of a subordinate gifted with traits he admired. The subconscious could confuse admiration for desire couldn't it? Maybe the erotic nature of his dreams, the compelling aspect of Sonny's maleness, could mean many things. A reflection of his own masculinity. An attraction to the unknown, or an attraction to something familiar and therefore safe.

His mind rebelled. He didn't dream of making love to men, only Sonny, and Sonny was not a dream construction, but real and true to himself. It was self-deception to try and fit his obsession into some cubbyhole of established analytical thought. No, this dream had something to do with Sonny and himself. If the source of his dream was some repressed desire, he feared it was the obvious. He wanted Sonny Crockett; and all too overwhelmingly, Castillo realized he wanted to be the man he was in his dream.

The eyes in the mirror gleamed with predatory light and shock as if man and beast occupied one image in the glass. There was no escaping the essential truth of his thoughts, but the question remained, why? Why now? And what was he going to do about it? This question made him abruptly cold, angry with himself. He wasn't going to do anything. He was going to live with it, contain it, control it. There was no reason for his heart to race at the thought of acting on it. The thought was appalling.

Castillo fully acknowledged the fact that he was capable and even willing to do shocking even cruel things, but not in the name of personal pleasure. His dream had awakened a knowledge that he wanted something he had never wanted before, also he was sure that the image of Sonny giving in to his own sensual demon was quite accurate. In his heart, if not his mind, was the conclusion to the dream. Sonny yields, the hour unfolds in a tableau of exotic, deliberate pleasure. The experience he forces on his friend is exquisitely pleasurable and ultimately destructive. Who they are, what they are, cannot possibly support what they become. For how could Martin Castillo and James Sonny Crockett be lovers?

A horrible pain curled up in his belly. Castillo felt the tear of desire and loss. He knew he could have what he wanted, but it would cost him what he loved.

The OCB was churning to life. Donuts and cold pizza were consumed with coffee as familiar voices mingled in familiar patterns. Sonny was late. Gina was putting on a fresh pot of coffee as Tubbs was trying to convince her to do some leg work downtown. She was laughing as she refused for the third time. Their greetings were warm. They saved him a donut they knew he wouldn't eat. He accepted a cup of coffee and glared pointedly at Sonny's desk.

Tubbs supplied an alibi. "Sonny's at the vet's."

Gina frowned. "Vet's as in V.A?"

Rico laughed. "Vet's as in Elvis ate a Boston terrier belonging to some tourist."

"Is he alright?" Gina asked. Her eyes were shining with mirth and her mouth was crooked in an unwilling smile.

"The terrier or the tourist?" Rico cracked.

"Elvis!" Gina insisted.

Stan perked up at the mention of the King. "What about him?"

Castillo remained impassive as the comic exchange gained momentum.

"Elvis ate a Boston terrier," Gina filled Stan in.

Stan put down his donut. "That's a lie! Jeeze, do you people do all your reading in supermarket checkout stands?"

"Easy big fella," Trudy reassured him. "We're talking about Sonny's Elvis."

Castillo patiently inquired. "When will he be in?"

Rico visibly choked back a wisecrack reply. "Any time, Lieutenant. He was just dropping Elvis off when he called."

Sonny blew in at that moment looking rushed and annoyed. "Sorry," he said immediately. "Something came up." He looked startled at the outburst of laughter.

"Was it still on a leash?" Tubbs cracked.

Gina controlled herself long enough to ask if Elvis was okay.

"Yeah," Sonny glared at Tubbs. "He's fine. They're gonna keep him over night for observation."

"I bet the Vet doesn't get many gators," Tubbs replied.

"Hey, this is Miami," Sonny reminded his partner. "Elvis sees a specialist."

Tubbs shook his head. "Back home that would be a sewage worker."

"Watch it," Crockett growled.

"Can we get to work, gentlemen?" Castillo suggested coolly. His eyes glittered flatly without emotion, but his detectives were not offended by his lack of humor. They were used to his subtle means of expression. They were still trading jibes as they followed him into the briefing room and took their places.

Castillo let their easy camaraderie settle into place like a comfortable suit. The matrix of personalities assuming their well rehearsed roles within the structure of his unit. He could asses each of them by how they took their seats, drank their coffee, the tone of their voices as they exchanged information.

For instance, whether Sonny sat at the far end of the table smoking, sat next to one of the others, or stood close at hand indicated his mood and the toll of his case load. Sometimes if he roamed the room or seemed distracted, Castillo knew he was restless and needed direction. He would divert the harder assignments to Crockett and Tubbs. If Sonny seemed to hover a little closer to one of the others Castillo would observe that person with more care, knowing there was trouble at hand. Even if Sonny never said anything or was even aware of specific concerns, Castillo had come to count on the blond detective's empathic nature.

Tubbs he had less patience for, or less interest in. The New York detective was a rather unique cross between chameleon and scavenger, but not in a bad way. It was

only that it was obvious Tubbs was always watching and following, adapting and gathering. His nature attached itself to Sonny's singular qualities, instinctively knowing what Castillo knew that Sonny was unique, powerful and going places. The sycophant in Tubbs' makeup latched onto what it recognized as superior. Castillo distrusted Tubbs' personal strength of character. He found his dramatic outbursts to be somewhat ludicrous imitations of Crockett's passion. Yet, Tubbs proved himself to be a good partner. Castillo remained satisfied by the duo. Tubbs was an intelligent man, learning fast. The very things that made Castillo impatient with him made him a good vice cop. That combination of chameleon and scavenger being the very thing the job required. He did not suffer the tow of the underworld the way that Crockett did, his simple soul untainted by the stains that tormented his partner. And that, Castillo reasoned, kept Crockett balanced.

He was scrutinizing them to obvious affect. The two men stared back expectantly. The jovial mood in the room stilled. The squad was tense, their faces alert. He was abruptly seized by a sense of immense pride. He knew it did not show, but they were all, to varying degrees, aware. Loyalty shone in each member like an aura.

He cleared his throat and proceeded with the briefing.

Afterwards, Sonny lingered behind the others. His green eyes smoldered with concern. "Martin, I get the impression there's something you're not saying. Is everything alright?"

Castillo allowed a smile. He should have anticipated he would not be immune from Crockett's empathic sense. This close he could smell the smoky essence of Crockett's exclusive blend of designer scents: cigarettes, bourbon, leather and gun oil. Heat radiated off his tan body with the more spiritual warmth of his personal strength. The heady combination made Castillo's pulse quicken. An unwelcome flash of dreamy eroticism pulled at his gut and heart-strings. To his horror, he watched color rise in Sonny's handsome face. There was confusion in the sea-green eyes.

"Sorry I asked," Sonny said gruffly. But there was no mistaking the riot his instincts were in.

Castillo did not answer. He simply waited, making his thoughts unreadable, his features impassive. Sonny moved out of his personal space. It was obvious to Castillo that the detective was already making his own excuses for the sudden surge of sexual tension that flared between them. It was gone now. Castillo was guarded and it was as if the choking rush of lust had never taken over. He left Crockett thinking his finely honed sexual instincts had been mistaken.

The loss of control alarmed Castillo though surely only a man as astute as Crockett would have picked up on the prurient surge of emotion that had seized him so violently. And it was violent! As violent as any influx of adrenaline that had ever shaken him to the core. It rolled over him like a wave as his sense were besieged by Sonny's presence. He could not forget the sudden widening in the detective's green eyes as awareness passed like a current between them.

Luckily it had been both abrupt and swift. Swift enough to dismiss.

Castillo frowned darkly as he returned to his office and the spartan comforts of a

closed door and uncluttered surroundings. He took out a bottle of aspirin, which actually contained a strong prescription. It would take some time for the pills to steal away the pain of tension in his back and head. Old injuries. Old pain. And now this new aggravation. What did it mean? His dream intruding on his work? Could he really be confusing reality with his bizarre dreams? Was that not the measure of insanity?

He rested his head with his palms pressed against his eyes and forehead. He could calmly rationalize everything but that sudden flare of very real lust. He'd never felt anything like it, not even as a hot-blooded adolescent. Not for someone he wasn't sexually involved with. And Gods! Never for a man.

He kept thinking if only he could understand the deeper meaning, he could purge the growing desire. Purge it he must before it took his sanity or worse.

□□□□□

Control came with time. Years passed and Castillo became aware of certain parameters. When Sonny was happy in his various relationships the dreams stopped. Then, as his instincts became aware of impending disaster, they would start again. The intensity of the dreams grew ever stronger, the explicit nature ever more varied. Some constants remained. Always there was the vision of Sonny's gold Rolex. Always his butterscotch voice softly protesting, leaving the distinct impression that he was true to his nature and not molded by the dream. Castillo was always the instigator, relentless and more expressive than he knew himself to be, merciless in his seduction. Nefarious in his sensual corruption.

In the dream, Sonny always succumbed. His voice choked with tears of betrayal, but they were masculine tears, strained with his effort to contain the emotions behind them. As the dreams progressed over time vivid images of Sonny yielding to internal and external sexual assault, betrayed by his friend and boss as well as his own nature, grew more detailed. His heart and his will broke, but Martin's dreamself was only moved to triumph not to pity. His waking thoughts were surging with sexual satiation and self-recrimination. He could not meet his eyes in the mirror when he shaved. Whenever he did, he increasingly recognized less self-disgust and more and more of the triumph.

He suspected that Sonny was about to propose to the doctor, Teresa, when her drug addiction surfaced. No one had ever told him the truth. He knew trouble of some-sort was on the line as powerful images of making love to Sonny began to steal away his sleep.

One thing was becoming clear to him as he meditated on his strange connection to Sonny Crockett's love life. The answers to the question of what made Crockett so tirelessly quest after romantic bliss were less important than the damage it did. Sonny sought love like a flower seeks light or an animal seeks shelter. He sought it as an antidote to the darkness and danger seething all around him.

It could not be denied that Sonny Crockett truly loved women. Women brought out

the best in his nature. He had genuine southern gentility that craved the finer things in life. But his heart was continually getting battered and bruised by the weaknesses in the women he chose. Invariably the women in his life were strong characters expressing equally the very best and worst of their essential qualities. A doctor who is a drug addict. The light and dark sides of the power of medicine. A business woman in the oldest trade... Sometimes the connections seemed so clear it was like a message being spelled out.

Then came Sonny's second marriage. The dreams stopped for a long time. Castillo even missed them at times. His experience with Crockett made him evaluate his new wife, Caitlin, with careful scrutiny. He could perceive no dark side to their marriage unless it was job related stress. Caitlin was a strong personality, but loyal. She had courage and a talent Sonny admired. It was interesting how Sonny coped with being the husband of a star. He was so used to being the center of attention.

No. Castillo never guessed what would happen. The dreams had not returned. This was because the tragedy in Crockett's life came not from his wife but from himself. Castillo would have done anything to avert the painful shock of her assassination. Sonny's heart was more than broken, it was torn from his body. And still the dreams did not return. Castillo was glad. He even thought that perhaps his obsession was over.

Sonny came back to work. The light was in his eyes; though shuttered and dim, it still glowed. He was resilient and pain had had its due. Castillo knew of course that Sonny was going after Hackman, Caitlin's killer. After all, it was Sonny who'd put Hackman on death row and Sonny who got him released. There was a sense of the inevitable coming to fruition that they all acknowledged and stepped aside for. Perhaps it was not the letter of the law or even the intent, but he allowed what he knew would happen to happen. His conscience was clear. And Sonny, who was always plagued by the demons of right and wrong in the nebulous confines of a vice cop's life, blew a 10mm hole in his adversary without so much as a blink of the eye. Some things, even execution, could be made sharply defined in a moment of time. No one ever questioned the justice of his actions, just as no one ever questioned who had mysteriously gunned down Frank Hackman.

Castillo watched as Crockett assumed his old life. He was the very interpretation of the walking wounded. Whatever inhabited Crockett's waking hours was a creature of pure reaction and no soul. It hurt to look into his eyes and see how weary and empty they were. It was as if he didn't dare feel. Loving comrades withdrew from him without realizing it. Self preservation asserted itself over concern. They were giving him "space." They were instinctively reacting to a dangerous being in the form of their friend. Castillo had seen it all before in the war. It chilled him now.

Tubbs surprised him by being the resolute one. He bravely stuck by his partner with more tenaciousness than Castillo had previously given him credit for. He shouldered both their work loads. He shamelessly covered for Sonny. Not knowing how to temper his consolatory efforts with distance, he simply waved all pretense to being anything but concerned. He let Sonny shove him away when it was too much and accept his help when it was tolerable. He seemed immune to abuse for the meanwhile. It was quite remarkable.

Castillo watched from a distance he was not content with. He saw pain tear apart

something he felt should be healing by now. He was not sure that what was coming through Caitlin's death was a man Sonny could be proud to be.

He thought about Sonny's motivations. He thought about the love, the warmth and the shelter Sonny kept trying to find and it occurred to him that all these things he wanted to offer. As a friend and superior he'd offered all the support he could and it was not enough, not when he knew he had this other thing to offer. He could ignite in Sonny that fire that was missing from his eyes. He could force him to feel sensations now in denial.

He would have been helpless to know how to do it if it were not for his dreams. He even told himself quite coolly that there was nothing to lose. Certainly nothing he ever dreamed or contemplated doing could do as much harm as the women in Crockett's life had done. And certainly whatever happened, Sonny would be pushed to one extreme or another. Even rage would be better than this horrible, gnawing poison now devouring Crockett's soul.

Perhaps it would be the end of a long friendship and strong working relationship, but a compulsion he could not deny kept drawing him inexorably to one course of action.
This time he would not wait for the dreams.

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Crockett had moved out of the house he'd bought with Caitlin in Key Biscayne. He was back on the St. Vitus, but to the best of Castillo's knowledge he had not sold the house. There was a woman living there. Castillo believed it was Caitlin's assistant. The same woman who'd been so cruel to Crockett at the funeral. It was plain she detested him, blaming him for Caitlin's murder. Typical of Crockett, he let her go on living in a million dollar mansion she had no claim to. Also typical, he was remained unchanged by the wealth his wife left him, the estate that continued to increase after the release of her last album.

The boat gleamed as if polished for display, ropes and tackle neatly coiled or stowed. Since the time Sonny had finally been convinced to turn Elvis over to a wildlife park in the glades, the St. Vitus was a lot less crowded and ordinarily more hospitable.

The evening light was sliding over the distant city, the water beginning to shimmer with electric reflections. Sonny was sitting in a canvas chair with his feet up on the rail. The end of his cigarette glowed as he tossed it into the water. "Lieutenant," he greeted. His eyes were bleak, his tone sardonic. He poured a hefty measure of Jack Daniels into a tumbler and raised it. "Drink?" He paused before raising it to his lips. His body tensed. "No? Did you come to ask me about Hackman?"

"No," Castillo answered.

Crockett grunted and put his feet on the deck. "If it's about the little tete-a-tete I've been arranging between the cartels, I've chartered a boat." He grinned darkly and

said with sarcasm, "Seems they want to do a little trophy fishing." His handsome but haggard features twisted in a bitter snarl. He took another drink and studied Martin. His eyes hardened. "Christ! You're as bad as Rico! I can handle it, Lieutenant." He got up angrily, facing Castillo, struggling with control. "I'm alright, Marty!" he said furiously. "I can do the job."

Martin looked out across the water. "I know," he said finally.

"Then what?" Crockett demanded.

Castillo did not turn. He let the rage and frustration bleed away into silence. "You're not alright," he stated calmly. He turned and faced Crockett coldly.

The ragged edge of his frustration was not enough of a defense. The green eyes shimmered with wounds. He didn't speak. He didn't move. Ah, but the look of betrayal was already there to be exploited. Castillo felt his heart twist in its casing. He didn't look away, already a little merciless in his capacity to absorb pain. Slowly he moved forward, picked up the heavy tumbler and handed it to Sonny. "Drink," he commanded. He watched unmoved as Sonny swallowed the drink. The light across the water caught the liquor with a glow like liquid topaz. It glinted on the gold watchband catching Castillo's somber eyes and making his breath suddenly stop.

In the next breath and beat of his heart, Castillo had Sonny's wrist in his hand and was holding it up. He pushed the band up and set his lips to the hard pulse. He could taste metallic residue like the copper taste in blood.

"Martin," Sonny said quietly. There was shock in the name. His voice shook.

Castillo brought his strong hand up to rake through Sonny's unkempt hair. It was silky and long like a woman's, but the skull beneath was definitely male. His mind registered strange details while his lips brushed across the gold stubble of Sonny's cheek and his other hand held tight to Sonny's wrist.

Tense and caught between the confusing impulse to yield to an embrace that could have been comforting in a brotherly fashion if it were not for that strange kiss, and a fierce instinct to push away an unwanted advance, Sonny was frozen. Taking a bullet had not been as shocking. Castillo was not being merely consolatory. "Stop it, Marty," Sonny demanded shakily, but he did not push Castillo away. The unexpected had caught him so off balance that all his normal reactions were in complete chaos.

Castillo took advantage of Crockett's inability to act. He concentrated on kissing Crockett's throat, knowing as the pulse beneath his lips began to race that his quarry was losing the battle.

"God," Sonny sobbed, his voice ragged as his body responded to the stimulus. Castillo kissed helpless tears. Crockett growled an unintelligible protest even as his lips sought Castillo's in surrender. He was like a lost thing letting Martin lead him below decks to the bed shared with so many women. Given a moment's release, he would have violently bolted, but Castillo never allowed him that.

With dream rehearsed hands, Castillo began to undress Sonny. Sonny wavered like a flame, still protesting. Each spoken denial Castillo conquered with a kiss or

demanding touch. He didn't need to say anything. There were no rational answers he could give.

Sonny's shirt fell to the floor and Martin kissed the exposed chest, nibbling the flat nipples, drawing a shuddering groan of thunderous passion from his vulnerable partner. "What the hell are you doing?" Sonny asked. And this made Castillo smile for the first time.

"You don't know?" he said.

Sonny looked trapped and yet he seemed to be caught up in the unreality of the situation. "Tell me why," he insisted.

Castillo kissed him deeply and thoroughly. He pressed his hand possessively over Sonny's crotch and bore him back onto the bed. Sonny arched up beneath him with a wild cry of utter passion. It was then that Castillo truly realized what he was doing. The triumphant rush of pleasure rippled through him with such intensity that he bore down on Sonny's writhing body as if he'd done this a thousand times and knew exactly how to ignite ever more explosive responses. It was the moment. The moment in his dream when he knew Sonny was past fighting it.

"Oh my God, Marty," Sonny swore huskily. "What the hell are you doing to me?" But it was the kind of amazed protest lover's voice in bed. Castillo took this moment to unbutton Crockett's trousers and pull them off. He smiled when he realized this maneuver was nothing new for Crockett.

Crockett was gritting his teeth as if there was a scream contained behind those handsome lips, but if there was, it was of pure pleasure. Castillo had fastened his mouth down over the rampant cock of his partner and he was drawing the life from it with determined strokes.

And there was nothing but this act, no sound, no thought. It was as if everything he'd ever wanted could be concentrated in a moment, and this action that he'd never contemplated with any other man. This was never in the dream and yet it was the dream itself to have Sonny at his mercy, a complete slave to his seduction. He could hear the snarling gasp of protest when he stopped before completion. Sonny's chest rose and fell like a bellows. The breath passed between lips just agape enough to invite kissing.

This time he returned Castillo's kissing with somnolent passion, slowly drawing on Castillo's lips, running his tongue against the invader with seductive inventiveness. Their bodies were pressed together. Throbbing erections in constant contact. But for all his apparent surrender, Crockett was not in control.

Castillo continued running his lips over Crockett's mouth and then his throat, silently asserting his domination. He could feel an anger beneath Crockett's passion. He raised himself up to look down into Crockett's face. What he saw there was not tender, but he didn't expect that. There was calculation and there was puzzled dismay. It was the face of a man who's last tie to love was betraying his trust. Love and loyalty mingled with despair and surrender. Crockett loved him and didn't care anymore what happened to himself. All Castillo could wonder was why this moved him not to sobriety and more noble actions but to a lust that was overwhelming. He

let Crockett see that he understood everything and then he leaned down slowly to capture Crockett's mouth.

Crockett groaned and he shook as if with sobs, but his arms came up around Castillo's shoulders and he surrendered to the betrayal of both his friend and his own body.

They were warriors on a battlefield of passion. They explored sensations that delved into agony and came up with rapture.

Crockett's quiescence gave way to a mounting tide of ardent response. His reactions gathered intensity until the two men were locked in an almost savage coupling. Crockett's emotional surplus came seething forth, an uncontainable alchemy of raw suffering and rage carried on a current of physical lust.

As this destructive emotional power came bursting from its prison, Castillo felt a moment of sheer exultation. They were transcendent beings in that moment. He gathered Crockett's rage and lust into his heart and soul like a warrior embraces battle. All that is terrible, all that is grand, the vicious untamed darkness and the soul binding brotherhood. A lust for life and physical sensation that pours over the conscious mind like a blood sacrifice. That part of his nature that he kept so tightly bound came racing out like a wild thing. It danced and wrestled with Crockett's intense emotional outpouring in joy to find a kindred spirit. It welcomed the heat and the hatred like it reveled in the purity of their sexuality. All constraints were ripped away. Castillo used all his strength against and for Crockett. He felt Sonny do the same. It was glorious.

The night tumbled away into exhaustion. Castillo did not sleep. He lay quiet, caressing Crockett's body, not really caring if he was awake or finally succumbed to sleep. He searched his mind for shame and could not find it. He didn't feel anything after the inferno of feeling everything. He wondered what this would do to Crockett and wished he could somehow give him the peace of mind he felt at this moment. He did not try to tell himself he had done the right thing in revitalizing Crockett's soul. He knew that he had awakened the preternatural being in Crockett. That part of Sonny that felt too much and understood too well the things that made him a bitter man and a worthy advisory that also made him a loyal friend and a champion of good. The fire that snapped and raged in his green eyes was now an emerald inferno. Castillo remained seared by it, the novelty still excited his senses, awakening something in him that he only recognized in dreams. To live without constraints, without limits. To experience in one night something beyond anything he imagined, that was what it was to pit himself against Crockett's capacity to feel.

When he finally rose and dressed, he could feel the green eyes watching him. The dark speculation and the silence did not make him feel uncomfortable. Still he was startled, profoundly moved by a warm hand seeking his shoulder. Soft lips kissed the back of his neck and then Crockett lay back. The look on his face belied the tender farewell. Castillo stared for a long moment, trying to access his emotions, but it was as if words would destroy that last touch. He turned away, leaving silently.

He drove home and found a message on his machine. Tubbs worried about his partner, trying to convince Castillo to order Crockett not to go out on the meet. "I don't care what excuse you give him. I have a bad feeling about this, Lieutenant.

Crockett's not himself. Don't tell him I said anything, just don't let him go."

Castillo considered the request seriously. There was genuine frustration and concern in Tubbs' voice. He thought perhaps it would be best to do as Tubbs' suggested. He knew Crockett would never forgive him, but that was perhaps the case anyway. There was no way to know yet if the emotional release Crockett had experienced had done more good than harm. He almost made the call. His hand was on the phone, fingers dialing. He heard Tubbs answer from his car. He said quietly, "The meet goes as planned. Crockett makes the call." He hung up without bothering to hear Tubbs protest.

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The green eyes were haunted by the specter of Burnett. Sonny had walked into OCB and surrendered like a sleepwalker. In a phenomena of favors called in and powerful strings pulled, Sonny had been reinstated as if his sojourn into the darkest region of his soul were nothing more than the long dark hallway he described. He emerged out the end to the light of his former existence.

Castillo heard the other's greet him, jokes about wanted posters and alter egos. He found Crockett at his desk busily going through the motions of reorganizing case files. He quietly insisted that he needed to work, but it was not time yet. Castillo could see this in the tremble of the elegant hands and the way Crockett avoided his eyes.

He asked painful questions about the murders Sonny was implicated in while he was living his alter ego's existence. Sonny again asserted that he did not remember. It was a lie and Castillo knew it. He knew also what Sonny so obviously did that to admit to anything at all would mean ruin. He had to adhere to the story that he did not remember anything after the explosion on the charter boat.

It was a horrible, awkward moment watching Sonny submit and walk out of OCB. He was trying to prove he would obey absolutely anything to belong once more. The need for his old life, old friends had been his salvation. It was the emerging memories of his true self that drew him to Miami and to surrender. He would have to prove himself worthy of that life before he would really be allowed back. He knew it and it pained him, but not as much as the distrust in his comrade's eyes.

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The sea was placid and the boat was still. The slightly unkempt nature of a small space well inhabited attested to the owner's return to sanity. The smell of a charcoal fire carried pleasantly on the cooling air. It was that time of the early evening when the air is soft and still suffused with southern light. Crockett was reclined with an open bottle of wine on the table beside him. "Care for something to eat, Lieutenant?" Sonny offered lazily.

"Sure," Castillo replied.

Sonny got up and went below, coming up with a wine glass, plate and utensils. He poured his guest a glass of wine. "It wasn't my cooking that brought you down here," he said easily.

"No," Castillo replied. He sipped the Beaujolais appreciatively.

Crockett set the bottle down and opened the grill to take the fish off. There was also an array of tomatoes, eggplant and mushrooms on a small screen. He occupied himself with motion. There was a precision to his movements, evidence of tight control, but he smiled wearily as he set the food on the table. "Too bad. I've become quite a cook."

Castillo smiled slightly. He studied Crockett a moment. "I asked you a question today. Off the record I'd like an answer." His eyes never left Sonny's face.

Sonny went very still. "I gave you my answer," he said tightly.

"Yes," Castillo answered somber.

Sonny sighed deeply. He'd said it himself, just name the tune and I'll dance. He was making the opening, rehearsed steps again. "I remember going out on the boat. The boat blew up and there was a hospital..." His eyes seemed to be searching as he folded his hands tightly together. "I remember Menolo..." He squinted into nothingness and for the first time Castillo had serious doubt about his belief that Sonny's amnesia was false. Perhaps his mind could not accept the memories of Sonny Burnett and still be Crockett. He thought Sonny was stronger than that, but perhaps the memories were worse than he knew. Suddenly he didn't want Sonny to recall. It was plain that he was genuinely trying. He stopped Sonny with a gesture.

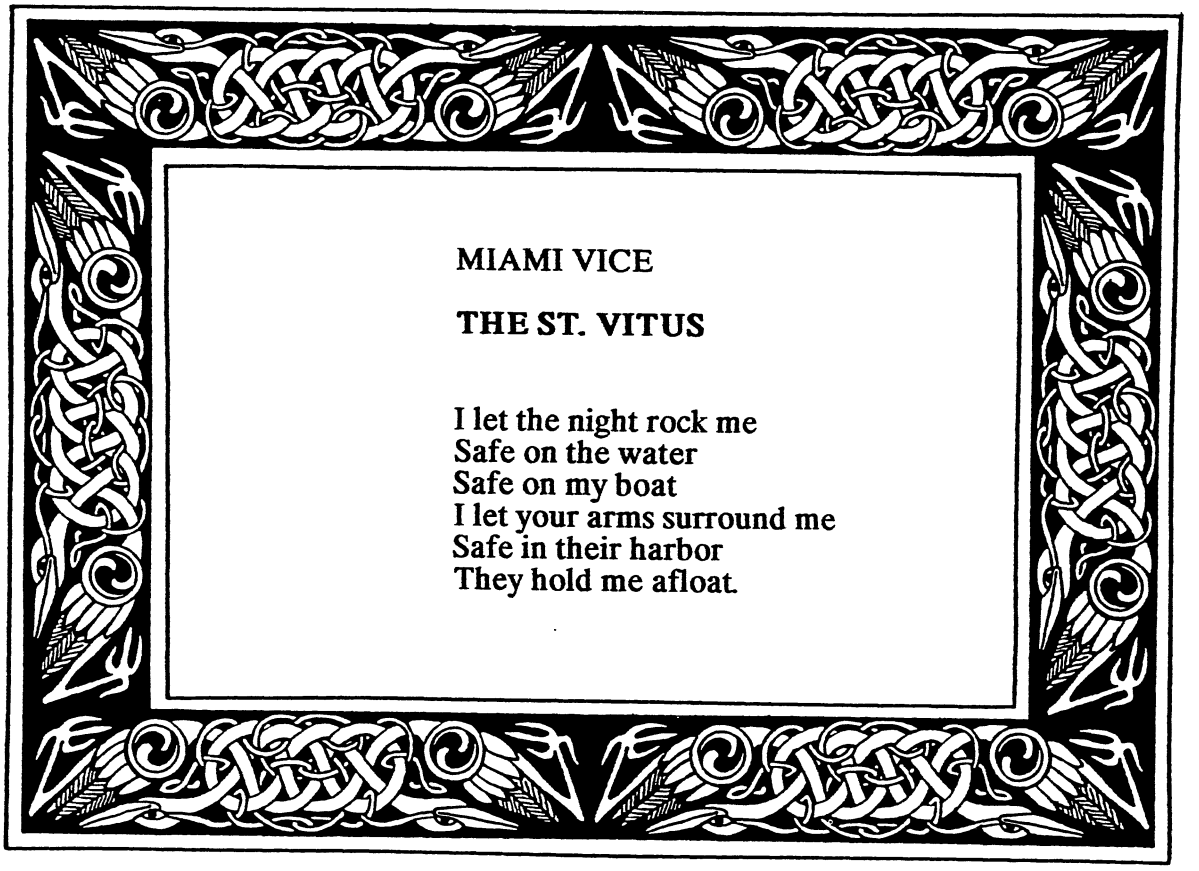
That awful, haunted expression was in Sonny's eyes. He stood up shakily as if to banish the thoughts that were converging on his mind. His back was turned. "I'm sorry," he muttered. It was nearly inaudible. "I don't want to remember."

Castillo rose, moving with exaggerated stealth and care. He stood just behind the detective. "What about before the boat?" he prompted softly.

Sonny didn't turn. His shoulders tensed. Castillo gave him time. He wasn't asking for a recurrence of that night or even for some-kind of admission, but he had to know if Sonny remembered. Even if he did but wanted to excuse himself of any awkwardness by covering the incident under the blanket of his wounded mind, Castillo would allow him that, but he wanted to know. He imagined he could feel Sonny considering all his options, knowing that the way out was left clear for him to take. He dropped his head, turned and straightened. He met Castillo's dark eyes with enigmatic green. His elegant hand spread out to touch Castillo's stomach and moved slowly down.

Sonny smiled seductively. "Refresh my memory," he offered.

Castillo's breath caught. He could feel himself beginning to smile as, inexorably, all constraints began to fall. The taste of salt was on his lips and the feeling of a force more powerful than himself surrounded him, like the sweep of the sea liberating his senses. His essential self was given to the primal current in absolute confidence. Here was a soul as dark and as enlightened by awareness of that darkness as his own. A fellow creature of the deep. Knowing and delighting in the unspoken moment of sweet sensation, they reveled without guilt in simple recognition.



MIAMI VICE

THE ST. VITUS

I let the night rock me
Safe on the water
Safe on my boat
I let your arms surround me
Safe in their harbor
They hold me afloat.

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

WARRIORS

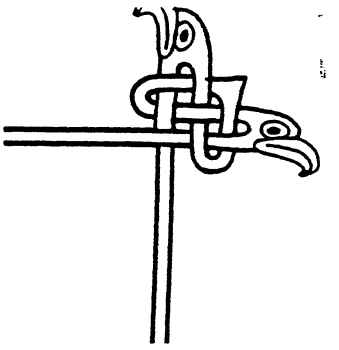
Slipping through the endless dark
you don't understand it like I do
your viper and the void
are part and parcel of a need fulfilled
another duty, more equipment, a job to do.

But this wicked little ship
is my second skin
this aching void of stars
is the only place I've really had
to call home.

You embrace and hold your family
coming from that into all other circles
with the air of a man visiting important places
but I gather bits and pieces of every gathering
into a scrapbook of emotion
forever homeless and afraid to overstay my welcome.

You are racing ahead
to the promise of a better place
all of this is temparary
the endless flying, fighting, and searching
that it may never end is your secret fear
so how can I admit
that I belong here?

We are lovers in a time of flight and war
we snatch at warmth
in an embrace of armor
and we wrestle our pains into passion
you whisper that love between warriors
is only permissable in this time of fear
so how can I admit
that I belong here?



CODE OF HONOR

by

Evelyn Green

He was flying again. In his ship again. Long range patrol. He was thinking, not of the endless starry void ahead, or of the complicated cockpit that surrounded him, or the massive battleship far behind. Not even of the planets forever lost to his people. None of them belonged to him, nothing was irrefutably home, not for him. Only one thing had ever come remotely close. He was thinking of Apollo, his sister Athena and their father, Admiral Adama. The closest he'd ever come to a family.

Starbuck sighed and closed his cobalt blue eyes. It was only on these interminable flights, when he was really and truly alone, that the old thoughts intruded. The old pain. He was an orphan; knowing that he was one of thousands did little to ease the ache. He didn't know if attaching himself to Apollo's family eased or abraded the old hurt. He only knew that he hungered for what they had. He watched them, awkward and self-conscious when they invited him into their family life. Since the academy Apollo had started inviting him home to share all the holidays and most of the vacations. That was Apollo, in everything perfect, or striving to be after the faultless example of his father.

Again that airless void in his chest. A whoosh of passing pain. Starbuck kept his eyes shut against the vision of empty space. Sometimes the glow of his helmet made his eye's feel dry. They ached now, as they usually did on these long patrols. His whole body was stiff and sore, desperate to stretch. He clamped down the panicky instincts that could make a Viper pilot go crazy.

He loved Vipers. He loved flying. He said it outloud three times, an aggrieved, weary mantra. Truth was that flying had been his escape from the stigma that wasn't supposed to cling to orphans yet stubbornly did. The military was his only real option, the way he'd been headed as a kid. He was always in trouble with the magistrate. He was always being remanded to institutions that did not want him. The military did. After his tests, the military was down right eager to have him. To his surprise he actually liked the discipline.

It was funny to remember how different the academy had been for Apollo. Starbuck smiled at the memory of their first day. Apollo was an aristocrat of sorts, being the son of an admiral and having lived a privileged life, attending all the best schools. He'd never slept in a dormitory. He'd never had to dress or bathe in the company of others. He never had his life ordered into strict schedules. Most of all Apollo had never been forced to bend his stiff neck in subordinate obedience to anyone. Adama was a better sort of commander than most, but he was at opposite pole of some who use rank to rule. Apollo was appallingly out of his element, but all the things he found so hard to .PA
accept were all that Starbuck had ever known.

Starbuck took the aristocrat under his unruly wing. There was something about the admiral's son that seemed so lost, so vulnerable and yet so proud. Apollo would break before he would bend. Starbuck had been woefully too aware that bending was all he'd ever done. Bend the rules, bend over if it came to that, bend with the wind. It was all part of rootless survival. He taught Apollo how to survive among the rank and file. He taught him how to relax and be one of the guys.

In his own arrogant way, Apollo was as much of an outsider as Starbuck had ever been. At the academy all were equal, all were dirt level ensigns under the boot of their instructor. It was amusing to observe how awful the experience was for Apollo. It was in his blood and his bones to lead. He simply had to excel at everything. He had to be in charge. Holding him back for his own damn good was never easy. Apollo was in a race to the top.

Together they had burned through all the academy had to teach. Apollo had the patience to teach Starbuck the academics. He forced him to stick out the tough courses. He'd always be grateful to Apollo for that. In a Viper though, he didn't need anyone's help. Flying came naturally. Flying was his. There wasn't another pilot that could equal him.

Starbuck patted the instrument panel affectionately. Flight school allowed him the only real pride he'd ever had. False cockyness became true confidence. He was good. It was a proven fact. Only he seemed aware of how incredible this was, how unlooked for, how sublime. To finally belong somewhere was the best thing, the absolute best thing he'd ever known. In the compact confines of a Viper he'd finally found a place for himself.

But home isn't something you earn. Apollo had said that. He said it with the gentle and somewhat puzzled concern he always conveyed whenever Starbuck tried to tell him about how he felt. "Home is where you have people who love and trust you, who you love and trust. It's always there." Easy for him to say.

How embarrassing and awkward it had been when Apollo had invited him to his home for the holidays. Starbuck flinched from the memory of having to admit to his friend that he'd never been in a real home. He'd never celebrated the holidays. He didn't know the rituals. He'd never sat down to a family meal. The awful clarity of that memory was warmed by the casual sweetness with which Apollo's family accepted him. They drew him in, overlooked his awkwardness with true grace.

Intimate glimpses into real family life became long and lingering. He came often to Apollo's home. He loved the sense of stability and support that Apollo took for

granted. The hunger grew. The ache became pain. He was the beggar at the feast, knew it, hated it, but couldn't tear himself away.

When Apollo was granted command, Starbuck wasn't bitter. He loved his friend and defended his promotion, knowing it really was deserved. Apollo worked hard. He was a natural leader. Still their relationship changed. Apollo made the hard choice of command over friendship. Starbuck made the equally hard choice to accept being subordinate to his friend. He saluted Apollo. He took his orders. He insisted on equality in their private lives.

Apollo didn't feel the need to push his comand. He didn't feel the need to make an example of his friend, because he was very self confident. Starbuck was glad of this. He knew other men in the same position may have been forced by falsely perceived notions of compromised loyalty to dissolve their personal connection. Apollo simply stepped up to the needs of comand. In all things he did what he thought was right. Starbuck could live with that. He was annoyed by some of Apollo's interpretation of what was correct, but he had always known that Apollo possessed ethics he could only emulate.

He started thinking about how around the time of Apollo's promotion he'd started to date Athena, Apollo's little sister. Apollo tried to be a friend, but he was also a brother. It had almost come between them. And now he realized that in this too Apollo had been painfully correct. In one awful confrontation Apollo accused him of using his sister to become part of the family. The words hit like a hammer. Starbuck would rather have had Apollo shoot him.

All he could remember now was the appalled look on Apollo's face. His heartfelt apology and the tears in his blue eyes. He threw his arms around him and called him brother. He begged him to for forgiveness and gushed his acceptance of him as a suitor for his sister. He'd even joked. "If she turns you down, there's always Zack!" he offered his little brother.

"And if he turns me down?" Starbuck answered.

Apollo didn't hesitate a moment. "Then there's me."

Starbuck had laughed. "You and I sealed?"

"We already are really, aren't we?" Apollo answered with happy conviction. His eyes sparkled and his white teeth flashed but he was tenderly serious.

All the pain of his hurtful words was washed away in that moment of true love. Starbuck had been emptied and then filled in the space of moments. He wished he didn't need it so much, but the truth was that his connection to Apollo's family was a lifeline.

It had sort of unraveled. This sad and ultimate thought brought him back to the present. The Cylon victory had taken his life apart, like it had for everyone in the fleet.

Apollo lost his mother and his brother Zack. He had a wife and lost her, but he had Boxy her son and he had his father's forces to comand. These things absorbed his free

time.

Adama had the fleet to be father figure to.

Athena... Well, Starbuck had come to realize that the affection he felt for her was more sisterly than passionate. Athena had yet to let go and find her own path.

The troubling upset of all this was that he was an orphan again. The time and extra affection Adama's family had to bestow was taken up by others now. In a sad and totally awful way Starbuck could visualize himself as jealous of Boxey. He saw the boy as the orphan child he wish he'd been. Someone taken in and loved when he found himself suddenly lost and alone. Boxey had it easy. Boxey was never a number.

The cold thought made him flinch and shudder. He was an adult now. The Thorn forest of Caprica was a lifetime away. He had no right to feel such childish thoughts. They were unworthy of a warrior.

He wondered what Apollo remembered....

All those years ago in the beginning as cadets. Apollo had made his bargain. "Now before we're warriors," he said in the darkness of their barrack hideaway. "Now it will be alright."

Alright... Alright to be lovers and brothers. Absolved of the sin of mutual need and loneliness. Apollo had this incredible ability to be affectionate. He also had a need to express it. Starbuck had to admit that he would have gone along with almost anything Apollo said, but this physical pleasure had always seemed like Apollo's secret vice. His one weakness.

For his part, Starbuck was used to being touched. He was used to both pleasure and pain. He could tolerate a lot. His life was full of conquests and compromise. He would have given a lot more than just his body for Apollo. In thrall to the closest thing to a brother he'd ever known, he agreed to Apollo's bargain. While they were students, before they had real responsibilities and the uniform of a warrior, they would be lovers.

It was against every natural inclination he had, but the memory was only pleasant. He only thought of it when all other memories had been exhausted. He sometimes wondered if it was this secret that came between them as grown men. He had no regrets, but he had no idea what Apollo felt. True to his own sense of honor, Apollo never gave the slightest inclination that they were ever anything but friends.

Uncomfortably Starbuck's body reacted rebelliously at remembered sensations of Apollo's body naked in his arms. Funny that for one who was a devout disciple of feminine charm, and had to struggle against his initial skepticism, he remained stirred by the memory of Apollo's lovemaking.

Long ago he'd decided he was not inclined toward other men. He never felt desire for anyone of his sex. He hadn't felt that way toward Apollo, but there had been something to it that he'd never thought of. Tenderness and strength, that's what stirred him still. The memory of feeling someone hold you who was as least as strong

as you. He could let go, even cry. He could be weak and it didn't matter. He could be the child, the soft one, the loved one. He could be held in the comfort and security of a man's arms. Something he did not even know he missed, never having had a father. In the same night he could turn and be everything else if his partner needed strength from him. He could hold and comfort another man. Apollo could give him as much or more pleasure than any woman he'd ever slept with.

That brought up the interesting fact that Apollo remained a virgin until his wedding night. Again that odd, personal code of honor that he adhered to. Apollo and women... Starbuck laughed softly in the dark confines of his ship. All those embarrassed questions, those curious and delightful games. "Is this what a woman likes? Is this what it feels like?" For once Starbuck got to be the self-assured one, the teacher, the one with all the answers. Apollo's wife must have had an interesting honeymoon.

Apollo was a strong and insatiable lover. He liked physical closeness. He was never satisfied with just his own pleasure. If he suspected that he hadn't gotten every bit his lover had to give or all that could be asked he was not done giving or demanding. This made him exhausting, but delightful, exasperating but endearing. If he had a flaw it was that Apollo never ever took no for an answer. And sometimes Starbuck hadn't wanted to leave what he was doing just to satisfy Apollo. Other times he had just wanted to give Apollo what he wanted so that they could both get some sleep, but no, that was never an option.

This was why Starbuck found it so hard to believe that Apollo could be truly happy in his celibate life as a single parent. It was noble. Apollo was nothing if not noble, but it was also not in his true nature or best interest. Still, Starbuck knew him too well. By his own code of honor, which Apollo would never insist that another man live by, he had doomed himself to a sexless existence. Starbuck more than anyone else in the universe knew that his friend could not be happy living this way.

On long range scouting missions such as this, when his own loneliness and deepest longings settled heavily about him, Starbuck could not help but mourn a little for Apollo. Always the same question arose. "What could he do for his friend?" Always the same formidable answer. The same provocative memories jumbled together under a rough cadet's blanket in the dark. He would push the idea away abashed and bewildered. He'd put the ship on manual and try to purge the memory.

He could feel Apollo's firm lips on the back of his neck. The soft voice murmuring endearing words. He'd lose himself in lustful abandon but never feel the slightest dismay about it. Collapsing always in satiated pleasure wanting to be held and to hold in return. He would not accept Starbuck's self depreciating humor or his shy withdrawal. Apollo loved sex. That had been the most disconcerting thing, his utter lack of reserve. He didn't question that they were both male. He enjoyed what they did, how they felt and it made everything easier.

When they were warriors, after the pins were on their uniforms and they were in command, they physical portion of their friendship was over without a word. It became not a thing of shame, but a thing of childhood. It was put away and never spoke of. There was some ancient acceptable precedent that Apollo sometimes spoke of when they first came together. It was ancient and honorable like the holiday traditions. It came with it's own rules. Starbuck, the orphan, had only Apollo to look

to when it came to such social concepts. He accepted the rules like accepted the gifts. He tried to show he could belong to Apollo's world.

There was pain, but they'd talked about it long before their separation. He was the one who had been sure this part of their relationship was not in his nature. He was so sure it would be a relief to go back to being close friends and nothing more. He looked forward to delving back into the arms of girls without guilt. But when it had finally happened the pain seared him. He hadn't counted on feeling so bereft and so uncertain. He hadn't counted on feeling like an orphan again.

He once called Athena Apollo in bed. He had nearly died of shame, but she thought it was incredibly funny. She even told Apollo. He laughed too, as if there wasn't a reason in the universe to be appalled.

If only they'd been born on another world, one of those that wasn't so homophobic! Well it could have been much worse than to be Caprican. It could have been much worse. On Caprica it was a somewhat exotic but archaic vice. Homosexuality was chic in some circles and it was very historic, but it was officially denounced. The stigma was worse than being without family and that was strong enough. The worst thing that could happen to a Caprican was to be disowned by family. Through no fault of their own, orphans suffered the same stigma. In the old days orphan and outcast had meant the same thing. More than once Starbuck had been rejected abruptly by a girl because he had no family. Even in the orphanages there was a difference between those who knew where they came from and those like himself who had no idea. The children who grew up as numbers. When they were old enough to be released from the orphanages they had to name themselves.

His mind was wandering. How could someone like Apollo know what it was like to stand shoulder to shoulder with other children and be forced to identify yourself by a number instead of a name? Wanting and yet dreading those who came to adopt. Hoping the orphanage had enough money so it would not be obliged to sell you to an agro collective, or some other horror.

Thoughts like these helped put a distance between his thinking of Apollo and himself and that other bizarre unacceptable idea that kept coming unbidden to his mind.

If Apollo was lonely, damn it, he should find some nice girl to seal himself to. He was capable, the willing women were plentiful. There was Sheba for one! He certainly did not need the merciful attentions of an old friend! But... Frak! Apollo would never allow himself some nice girl. There was Boxy and Boxy's mother's memory to honor. There was honor itself, (his own strange version). Sheba, if she had any brains, would have forced the issue by now, take the decision out of his hands, it could be done. How could she know that. What could he say to convince her. "Trust me I've done it?" Lord's of Cobal! The thought made him blush.

It was coming back to that same awful consideration again. He knew that he could barge in and give Apollo the physical release he needed. He could force him into it if it came to that. The Lords knew that Apollo had done it more than once to his reluctant hide. It was what he needed. Maybe it would even shake him out of this honorable passionless rut he was in. And maybe, maybe it would be the biggest disaster since the Cylon peace summit...

He thumped his helmet against the headrest hard. "Apollo, damn you!" he growled. But his heart was thumping ever louder in his chest.

"Starbuck. You say something?"

For a moment his heart jumped but it was only Boomer sleepily coming out of his rest phase. "Sorry," he said. "I'm starting to talk to myself."

"Yeah, well look at the readout. They're signaling us to come in. Is your butt as numb as mine?"

"What butt?" he answered plaintively.

"The human body was not designed to stay in a fighter this long," Boomer complained.

"There's a lot of things the human body was not designed to endure," he mumbled. He was thinking meaningfully about Apollo.

"I hear that," Boomer agreed none the wiser.

They turned with a power arch that once would have been considered a difficult maneuver, but circumstances had made routine. Thinking about it, Starbuck reflected that all the pilots were sharper, better flyers than they had been before the colonies were destroyed. They spent more time in at the controls. They had an incredible amount of fighting experience. He doubted the Cylons would have been able to take the fleet if all the Battlestars had the experienced Viper pilots that the Galactica boasted. He teased himself with the knowledge that they were the best there'd ever been. He mused outloud to Boomer.

Cautious as ever, his wingman answered. "There's no way to know that for sure. And besides it doesn't do any good to look at the war from hindsight. You could drive yourself crazy."

"I guess," Starbuck agreed. "Still, if you were to run our response times, our maneuvers against the records of before the destruction of the colonies, I bet you'd find I'm right," he insisted.

It was the kind of speculative debate they often engaged in on these long flights. Heavily Boomer said, "I'd rather have less seasoned pilots and the colonies in one piece."

He didn't expect this depressing response. "Yeah," he sighed. "I didn't mean it that way. You know that."

"Sure, buddy," Boomer answered. "It's just that sometimes I think you're finally in your element."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Starbuck answered testily.

"Hey, no offense," Boomer apologized. "It's just that everyone else avoids talking

about the colonies. They lost too much. I know I did. I don't like to think about it, but you."

"Are you saying I had nothing to lose? That isn't true. Caprica was my home."

"Was it?" Boomer's voice asked softly. "I never met anyone as at home as you are in a Battlestar. It's like this is the life you were born for. Again, no offense, but I don't think you care whether we reach Earth or go on like this forever."

Starbuck thought about this a moment. He tried to isolate why he felt so threatened by his friend's words. Boomer touched on a truth he'd never really stopped to analyze. "You think?" he asked.

"Yeah, I do, buddy. You don't seem to feel as confined as the rest of us, or as lost. I don't think you really need a planet to call home. In a way you're lucky."

"I never thought of it like that. You could be right." The words settled into contemplative silence. Carefully he asked, "Boomer?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you really believe in Earth?"

Boomer heaved a great sigh. "The Commander believes in it."

"And that's enough for you?" Starbuck asked.

"It's enough for the whole fleet. Anyway, what else is there?"

Starbuck wasn't so sure. He listened seriously to concerns that they would pass up a habitable available world for a mythical one they might never find. Sometimes the bulk of his defense of Commander Adama's vision was based on personal loyalty. Now he wondered if Boomer was right, that he didn't care where they went or how long it lasted. "That's pretty much how I look at it, but I'm not sure if I really believe. Earth, I mean, well, it's always seemed kind of fantastic."

"I know, but Adama knows things we don't. Some of the things we've come across have made me see it differently. I don't know if we'll see it in our lifetimes, but I really do think it exists."

The words reassured him. Boomer was the most level headed, practical and cautious man he knew. If Boomer really believed in the quest, he could to. He suspected that Apollo still had unvoiced doubts. Adama's son had never shared his faith in the old religion. Like most of their generation Apollo put his faith in science and technology. Magic and myths had no place in the modern world, or so they thought. Now they were on this quest, and strange things seemed to shake the modern belief that the old ways were false. There was a resurgence of religious practice and belief in magical powers among the survivors. Some of it was scary in its reactionary fanaticism and some of it was charming, but it was hard for Starbuck to embrace. He knew it was less of a challenge for Apollo, who'd at least been raised with faith, still, though Apollo never said anything anymore about his religious doubts, Starbuck was sure his inner conflict was strong.

Apollo, Apollo, Apollo, his thoughts kept coming back to him over and over. An awful, but thrilling certainty was settling into his gut. He knew he was set to do something rash, and stupid. It was like he could already see himself in motion. A dream where you can't stop running.

"You're awfully quiet this patrol. Are you alright?" Boomer asked concerned.

"Sure. Never better. Why?" he queried. He was flustered and lamely tried to cover it. The full range of how uncomfortable discovery of his thoughts would make him came home. He squirmed in his seat.

"If you say so," Boomer answered unconvinced.

"I'm just thinking," Starbuck defended himself.

Alarm came through Boomer's voice. "Oh, no, not again. What is it this time? Pyramid gambling? Getting us out of the next patrol? Trying to get a furlon on the Rising Star with Cassie?"

"Relationships," he answered truthfully.

Dead silence.

"Boomer?"

"I heard you. Now I'm convinced there's something wrong, unless you're going to follow that up with how to get out of them. Or are you going to tell me you've got troubles with women?"

"Trouble with women?" He laughed. "Not me, buddy. Well, except for understanding them..."

Boomer was chuckling softly. "I only wish I had your problems."

"I wish you had them too," he heartily agreed. Suddenly the idea of Boomer and Apollo in bed made him struggle to keep from bursting out laughing. He cut his mike and indulged himself. "I'm losing my mind!" he exclaimed between bouts of laughter.

Microns later the fleet came into view. The mighty Battlestar ambling along at the fleet's pathetic cruising speed. Patched together freighters rubbed shoulders with luxury liners. Small shuttles, like insects swarmed along carefully planned routes between ships.

"Home sweet home," Starbuck said happily.

"I can't wait. Hot meal, cold ambrosia and ten or twelve hours of real sleep!"

"You said it, buddy!" He kicked in the last of his booster fuel and angled for approach. His body began to ache anew with impatient desire to get out and stretch. He could land a Viper in a launching bay with his eyes closed, but he never slacked off, always making the same clean approach. That's one of the things that made blue

squadron the best, they insisted on brilliance even in the basics. It was the basics, landings, take offs, standard maneuvers that proved a squadron's professional pride. These things were the deadliest, killing careless pilots who survived Cylon engagements only to die from a sloppy approach or running into each other. Attention to the basics was one thing that Colonel Tigh and Commander Adama never let up on.

His Viper hissed and popped as he opened the hatch and gratefully took off his helmet. His ears burned and his blond hair was oily from the long confinement. It was hard to stand and climb out of the cockpit. "Must be getting old," he grumbled. He had only to look over where Boomer was making the same hesitant descent from his Viper to know he wasn't alone. Their crafts steamed crackling with energy and expanding metals warming in the heated launch bay. Starbuck ran his hand over the ice and carbon scored side of his beloved Viper. "Sorry, baby," he apologized to her. He left her in the competent care of the flight crew.

Boomer was stretching and complaining as he shuffled toward the lift. "Buy you a drink?" he offered amiably.

"Later. I want to get cleaned up first." He leaned with his wingman on the lift's hand rail. "I feel like I've spent a yarin in a daggit's belly."

"You look it," Boomer agreed wearily. "Don't say it," he raised his hands defensively. "I feel the same."

After a hot shower and a fresh uniform all he wanted to do was eat, drink and hit the rack, but he knew he had to face up to what he'd resolved to do now or never. Apollo could always yell at him and toss him into the nearest bulkhead. At least now if he made a total fool of himself he could attribute it to the rigors of the long range patrol.

At the door to Apollo's quarters he asked for entry. Apollo was at his desk. There were bright colored toys scattered on the floor. Apollo was at his desk frowning at the readout on his monitor. "Starbuck! Welcome back. How was patrol?" His sapphire eyes glinted with pleasure over his startling white smile.

Momentarily taken back by the realization that although he'd come to a momentous decision, his friend was completely unaware of his state of mind. "Long" he answered abruptly. His pounding heart was sinking fast. He almost turned for the door.

"Something wrong?" Apollo asked, his smile fading into genuine concern.

"No. Yes." He hovered uncertainly between leaping forward and rushing out. "Can I talk to you?"

"You know you can," Apollo said firmly. He seemed a touch insulted by the question. He turned his computer off and focused all his attention on his friend. "What's the matter?"

"You," Starbuck blurted. He paced and gestured expressively with his hands. "I can't stop thinking of you. No, I mean I can't forget. I don't think about you all the time," he explained suddenly embraced. "It's just when I've been out there a long

time, I think about normal things, the usual things: the mission, my ship, routine. Then I think about Cassie and sometimes my past. Eventually I always start thinking about you. The academy. You know the things we did."

Apollo looked pale. "Starbuck," he warned.

"I know. I know. Don't mention it. Never think about it. That's the rule. That's what you decided, Captain," he said Apollo's rank bitterly. "You decided for both of us. You may have that right as my commanding officer when it comes to the job, but what gives you the right to turn me on and off like a switch? Can you order me to love you and then forget all about it? Apollo I've tried, but I can't obey!"

Apollo rose slowly from his chair. "Starbuck," he began gently, as if his friend were losing his mind. "What are you talking about?"

Incensed Starbuck took a step back. "Don't you dare pretend you really have forgotten!" he snarled.

"No," Apollo admitted. "I haven't forgotten." His tone was tender and he tried to meet his friend's tormented eyes. "What I mean is, what do you want?"

"Want?" he asked stunned. He found himself staring at Apollo's softened features and concerned blue gaze. "Me? I came here to talk about you."

This surprised Apollo. "Me?"

"Yeah, you," Starbuck insisted. His somewhat furtive gaze remained held and still. "I don't think it's right for you to be so alone. I know you have this felgercarb sense of honor that makes you hold yourself apart. Maybe you have to. But not from me," he urged.

Stricken, Apollo turned away. "I wish you wouldn't have done this."

"Why? Are you that ashamed of me?"

"Ashamed? No. Never. Not of you or anything we did. What are you offering me, old friend, a sympathetic liaison? That's what I'm ashamed of, that you should think I'm that pathetic. You offer yourself as some kind of sacrifice when we both no your heart's not in it." His fine skin was flushed and his eyes glistened with tears.

"Don't tell me how I feel!" Starbuck shouted.

"Starbuck, why do you think I made that decision?" he asked.

Trying hard to hold onto his emotional edge Starbuck, replied hotly, "For your own selfish reasons. That unyielding notion of honor that you live by."

Tears spilled. "I made that decision because I wanted you in my life, as my friend if I couldn't have you as my lover. I knew I couldn't keep that part of our lives forever. You made that perfectly clear. You were never comfortable with our relationship. I wanted to give you a way out. I thought I'd done that."

Starbuck was shocked. "You're telling me you made all that up? 'The honor of warriors. For the good of our careers.' That was all felgarcarb?"

Apollo shook his head and laughed. "Trust you to get angry. I make one of the hardest decisions of my life for you and you're angry. Don't you realize that broke my heart?" he said earnestly. "All you talked about were women."

"But you got sealed," Starbuck stuttered a protest.

Apollo smiled. "Yes, and I loved her very much, but that never meant I stopped loving you. You had to know that," he insisted intensely. He gripped Starbuck by his shoulders to force him to understand his emotion. His powerful affection and continuing desire.

"I didn't know!" Starbuck answered. "I believed everything you said. I thought you could just leave what you and I had behind along with the academy and everything else we left behind when we graduated. You never once seemed to look back. I thought you had everything you wanted."

"Everything I wanted..." Apollo sighed. "If that's true, what are you doing here?" he asked pointedly.

Abruptly it came to him that there was something he wanted. He wanted very much. The appeal for it must have been in his eyes because Apollo didn't pull away when he leaned in to kiss his lips.

All the old feelings came rushing back. The warmth, the awkward but powerful desires. That strange but thrilling forbidden sensation of Apollo's mouth caressing his lips. Male hands reaching to cradle his head and spread strong fingers under his jacket across his back. Like the old days, Apollo was relaxed and sensuous, as if their being men didn't intrude on his passion. All his arrogance, his aloof, formidable command presence melted away as if it'd never been.

Starbuck had never initiated their union before, happy to give the impression that he was the reluctant one. Now he shook as if he couldn't control his emotion. He let Apollo take possession of him with welcome surrender. Strong hands pulled his jacket off. Masculine whispers asked if he was sure. Did he really want this? He nodded because he was afraid his voice would break under the strain.

Apollo locked the door from the inside. He hesitated before turning to face Starbuck. His smile was tremulous. "This is insane," he observed, wincing at the onslaught of reality.

Starbuck strode across the room to confront him. "You know me. You know me better than anyone ever has. I trust you more than I've ever trusted anyone, but I swear if you pull away from me now I--"

Apollo silenced him with a kiss. "I won't pull away. I just hope we don't regret this. Are you sure this is what you want?"

Rationally, or as close as he could get to rational at the moment, Starbuck considered the question. Confidently he said, "I want what we had, trust and

freedom." He stumbled after the words to explain what he was only just realizing he missed. "The only complications we had came from outside ourselves. You never tried to hold me back from anything. I knew I had what you needed. I'm not always sure with women," he confided this secretly.

Tenderly Apollo embraced him. "Your secret is safe with me," he whispered in Starbuck's ear.

They took off their uniforms just like they did a thousand times in various company. Tugging at fasteners pulling limbs free of tight constrictions. There was nothing new to reveal and no need for pretense, still the deference between this and the thousand or so locker rooms and barracks made stripping seem wildly arousing.

They came together, touched, embraced and made their way to Apollo's bed. It was of course neatly made. It's owner ripped the covers away savagely and the lovers tumbled onto the cold sheets.

In his lonely Viper, teased and tormented by old memories, Starbuck had forgotten the real sensations. The push of hard flesh against tender membranes. The shudder of masculine need clashing in pleasure and pain. He'd forgotten what it felt like to hover in fear and anticipation holding onto the promise of delight. It gripped him. It was like the waiting in his Viper in the launch bay, bracing for the powerful forces that would vault him into heaven with a single terrifying, exhilarating rush. When it came he cried out. A wild inarticulate cry. He was moving and moaning in time to Apollo's insistent lovemaking. All thoughts dissolved into pure sensation. He was lost and loving it.

Beads of sweat dripped off his blond hair. He flung his head up and they spattered against the headboard of Apollo's bed. From his open mouth the air rushed out of his corded throat and laboring lungs. He reached that point in running when he felt he could run forever. The burning current that ran up his belly was drawing the pleasure out of him, like a river it seemed to flow in an endless rush.

Apollo was mouthing the back of his neck, murmuring in his ear, but Starbuck could not hold onto the words. He couldn't find the meanings. He gasped and thought he nodded his head in answer to some question, but he didn't want sense. Apollo's firm hand was stroking him, making him cry out.

It had never been this good. He'd never lost it like this before, never trusted so completely. He abandoned every defense he'd ever built or clung to. Fabulous, even the pain. Glorious every moment. He could not get over the vision, the fantasy, Apollo was his pilot, in him, driving him. He laughed. Yes, hitting the thrusters! And the blaze of laser cannons and the engines were shooting through his body bursting from the top of his head. Apollo was making a kind of gasping animal cry as he fired them both in unison.

Starbuck collapsed slowly onto the wet sheets. He rolled over to meet Apollo's dazzling satiated smile. The sapphire eyes were dark and dreaming, gleaming with happiness. "Starbuck, that was... That was--"

"Fantastic," Starbuck agreed hoarsely. "Incredible." He kissed Apollo with his newfound lack of self-conscious barriers. He tasted the warm sweetness of his lover's

mouth. Surprising Apollo with his ardent attention to detail. "If I never loved you before, I do now. If I wasn't as sure about the sex when we were cadets, I am now."

"What about Cassie?" Apollo asked gently.

"Do think she'll be able to tell?" Starbuck questioned anxiously. He suddenly feared that everyone who laid eyes on him would ascertain immediately their new relationship.

Apollo grinned. "Are you going to tell her?" he asked. He was amused that Starbuck, being Starbuck, could not help his duplicitous nature and was already hard at work trying to figure out how to juggle his two lovers. The appalled stare confirmed his assessment and he brushed the hair from his friend's face and kissed him tenderly.

Starbuck returned the kiss easily, but distracted. He was frowning thoughtfully. "Apollo," he began slowly.

"Don't worry, my friend. I would never ask you for a commitment like that. I won't even ask you to tell her. If you want we can keep this our secret," he reassured.

Starbuck sighed with relief. "Not that I'm not happy about this. Not that I'm ashamed at all. If you really want to, we can announce it for all I care," he babbled.

Apollo silenced him with another kiss. "No announcements. No shame. Just us. You know what you feel for me, and that's enough. Now you know what I feel for you. Truth is, I don't want another woman. The situation being what it is, it wouldn't be fair to her. It was hard enough with Serina. I don't think she ever understood that it was difficult balancing the needs of the fleet against a marriage was. I always felt like I couldn't give her what she deserved."

Irrepressible to the last, Starbuck quipped, "If you gave her anything like what you just gave to me, believe me, she got more than enough!" He winced visibly. "I'm just thankful I'm not on patrol for awhile."

Apollo laughed. His momentary grief obliterated in Starbuck's strong arms. "I was making up for lost time," he explained, tugging at the blond mane. He stroked Starbuck's damp back and pulled himself closer to his lover's chest. He liked the echo of the powerful heart and the feel of Starbuck's muscles sliding smoothly under his flawless skin. He'd missed this so desperately, refusing all the while to acknowledge the pain of the separation. Tasting salt as he opened his mouth to kiss Starbuck's neck and face he could feel the impossible return of desire. "Do you want to take a shower and get some sleep?" he offered. There was no reply. Starbuck was asleep, dark lashes serenely closed over those crafty bright eyes, lips slightly apart. Apollo thought of getting up, taking a shower in the tiny but well appointed bathroom his quarters contained. Drowsy happy contentment weighed his limbs and persuaded him to pull the covers over them both.

Starbuck was flying again. In his ship again. Long range patrol. He was not alone. He rested his head back against his lover and let Apollo's arms surround him. He was sitting between Apollo's strong legs. The stars glittered with gem fire colors in the absolute black of endless space. In the dream they didn't need to wear their helmets.

Their was no protective glass around them. The stellar wind whipped their hair back and caressed their skin. "Look," said Apollo. His warm breath against Starbuck's ear, his tone full of tenderness and wonder. "There's Earth. Starbuck do you see her?"

He looked and there was a beautiful blue and green planet. He could see the shimmer of her deep seas and the wealth of her vast forests. There was no sign of human life. Earth was a fabulous virgin paradise waiting for her lovers to come and claim her.

Apollo's laugh rustled his hair. He could feel warm kisses on his neck and shoulders. "Starbuck we're home!"

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

STARBUCK

Flustered and edgy
from unaccostomed love
you stammer through an excuse
and your body tenses with nerves.

You wait to be hurt
as if it's expected
you offer no defense
except this nervous flight response.

I've got to hold you down with all my strength.
I always do.
I have to pin you in my arms
and force you to recieve
all the things you deserve
that for some reason you don't believe.

The women who want you
can't hold you
not with the strength that I can
and the women who've loved you
don't know you
not the need that can be filled by a man.

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

ON CAPRICA

On Caprica orphans are not allowed
in holy places
where ancestors are venerated.
And we are called unlucky

On Caprica your home
was a place of genteel
aristocracy.
Your mother greeted you with joy.
Your brother and sister
followed you into noble service.
And your benevelent father
was the epidomy of paternal strength.

On Caprica my home
was just like this
a barricks full of bunks
and ordered storage
a collection of souless neccessities.
I was never any one's beloved son
never a brother.
On Caprica I was a number
before I was a warrior.

And now they say the old ways are gone
with Caprica.

I've made a name for myself
a life for myself
and in some ways even a family
among the warriors of the fleet
I'll fly to defend it
I'll fly to provide for it
but I'm terrified of losing it
to this Earth we're searching for.
I'm afraid things will be
as you and everyone hope they'll be
the way things were on Caprica.

There will be no place there for me
no room for warriors
or warrior love
and you will become a leader of men
and I will be an orphan again.

QUANTUM LEAP

SNOWBLIND

by

Taerie Bryant

Sam materialized fighting to stay upright against fierce winds and blowing snow. Wet, downy flakes stole in where only air was wanted. For a long moment he floundered before his body recognized a situation his brain had forgotten and he began to get his balance on skis. "Oh boy!" he gasped loudly. The wind pulled the words away and shoved him forcefully. He could only make out the shadowy outlines of trees on either side and had no idea which direction he should be traveling.

"Al!" he called into the storm. "Al?" There was no answer. No rectangular flare of the imaging door. No familiar, if frustrating, sarcastic voice cracking wise at his expense, more importantly, no help. All he could assume was whomever he had leaped into had been headed in the right direction. He started skiing straight ahead. After an hour of battling the wind and the cold with darkness closing in Sam began to think that maybe what needed to be changed in this leap was a simple change in direction.... "Oh, Al. Where the hell are you?" he exclaimed in weary aggravation. He stuck his poles into the deepening drifts and paused for breath. His back ached and his hands and face were numb. It was getting increasingly difficult to see. He was not sure he was on the trail anymore. The trees seemed too close together and the drifts too deep, but he couldn't be sure just how far back he had gotten off the trail even if he had.

The cold was getting intense and his clothing was getting damp with sweat and gathering snow. The situation moved rapidly from serious to critical. The air tasted wild and icy, something dangerous was hinted in the flavor. Nature had abruptly gripped him in a buffeting display of mountain weather. Sam knew if he did not find shelter soon these cold and bitter hours in the wilderness would be his last.

Abruptly, the wind changed direction and the snow swirled in a sudden eerie calm that carried the force of the blizzard away. He could see a light through a dense grove of ancient firs. At first he thought it was a chance reflection of the moon on a patch of snow, but it was amber and bobbed in an erratic fashion. He thought it must be a lantern and a lantern meant safety. As he headed toward this promise of shelter he thought he heard someone calling his name. He stopped and turned. "Al?" he called again. He could have sworn it was Al, but there was no reply. "It must be the storm," he said aloud, as if to convince himself, but even as he said the words he had a disturbing sense of doubt. He almost headed back the way he came, but he quickly decided that would be foolish.

The snow was very deep and powdery between the dark fir trees and the tiny glow of light. Sam could see it now more clearly. There was a black shadow of a large cabin almost buried in drifts of snow. It looked very old and run down, but there was still that little light and gradually as he got closer there was more of the amber glow spilling out through cracks between the shuttered windows.

The wind made an ominous deep howling sound behind him. The trees rustled and bent with the sound of a multitude of ghosts whispering loud, unintelligible cries. Sam felt as if any moment the storm would again descend on him as if it were a living threat kept at bay by this tiny haven of light.

The door of the cabin opened and a figure in a heavy parka stood in the frame of light. It reminded Sam of Al appearing from the imaging chamber door. He struggled through the snow on weary legs. The figure in the doorway had a lantern. Sam could see by its light the face of a beautiful woman peering into the darkness. She swung the lantern as she tried to make her way through the deep snow to help him. He realized it was this motion that he had seen earlier. He was floundering on the last dregs of his strength and still he thought that somewhere out in the darkness he heard Al calling, "Sam, where are you?"

"I'm here, Al!" he tried to yell, even as the woman put her shoulder beneath his arm and helped him forward, but his voice was weak.

"My God, you're half frozen!" his rescuer declared. She worked to bring him to the doorway. Her slight frame supporting his weight.

Before the doorway to the cabin was a semi-circle where the snow had been cleared away, it was there that they struggled to remove his skis. "I don't know these bindings!" she complained. Sam maneuvered the tip of his sky pole into the release mechanism and pressed down. With a click the binding let go of his boot. "You're lucky. You could have frozen to death tonight," she shouted over the howl of the wind as she helped him with his other ski. Hurriedly she stood his skis against the cabin and helped him inside. Sam rallied his strength to help her push the heavy door shut behind them. In the sudden silence she swept back the snow-dusted hood of her parka. Her eyes were dark and accented by an artful application of eyeliner. "You're one lost soul, aren't you?" She observed with a smile.

"Yes, I guess you could call me that," Sam replied. His face was numb and the sudden dry air of the cabin made it begin to tingle with thaw.

Her eyes widened and her lovely lips curved in a smile. "Come on. Let's get you in some dry clothes!"

"Are you alone here?" he asked, brushing snow from his clothes and removing his jacket. She took her parka off and hung it on a peg by the door, took his jacket and hung it on a neighboring peg. Her auburn hair was short and curly. She turned a look on him that was both pained and suspicious.

"More than you'll ever know, why?" she said, her voice was rather low and had a slight European accent that he couldn't quite place.

Sam wondered if he was supposed to know her. He said, "It just seems unusual, that's all."

She shrugged narrow shoulders. She was dressed in black stirrup pants and a form-fitting matching turtleneck sweater.
"I am waiting for someone, if that answers your question. I thought you might be him."

"Someone's lost out there?" Sam replied, alarmed.

"Yes," she answered sadly. "For far too long I'm afraid. Sometimes, I think I hear him calling. I go out and look but it's never him...." Her voice trailed away. Her eyes glistened wetly with a haunted expression.

"How long has he been missing?" Sam asked, gently.

She shook her head and wiped her eyes carefully. "I'm no longer certain. So many nights have gone by. They all run together." She crossed her arms and walked across the cabin to the welcoming fire. Sam was surprised by the size of the cabin it seemed much larger than he had first thought. The main room was open-beamed with a twenty foot ceiling. The high walls were home to deer antlers and stuffed creatures of all kinds their glass eyes reflected the firelight in an eerie imitation of life. Big overstuffed chairs and couches were grouped in front of the hearth. The polished wood floor was carpeted with sheep skin rugs. There was no sign of electric power. His rescuer stood before the blazing light of an enormous fireplace. She swayed softly with melancholy grace. The firelight played off her hair. "I have his things," she said quietly. "His clothes should fit you." Her eyes were dark and sad. She shrugged and took a candle from the mantle, lit it and motioned Sam to follow her to a door hidden in the shadows on the far side of the room. Sam found himself in a comfortable bedroom decorated with a few glass framed old prints of wildlife and mountains. The room had its own fireplace, but now was cold and shadowy.

"Thank you," he said, as she handed him the candle. The little dancing flame glittered in her eyes. "What's your name?"

"Amanda," she answered staring into his eyes. "And yours?"

Sam faltered unsure of what to say. "Sam," he stuttered. "Sam Beckett."

"Well, Sam Beckett, don't be too long changing. This room is too cold without a fire." She slipped past him and closed the door behind her.

Sam took a pair of dark wool slacks out of the drawers, a fresh change of socks and a shirt and sweater. Amanda was right the clothes fit perfectly. He carried his wet clothes out with him to dry them by the fire. Amanda was waiting for him with a brandy glass warming on the hearth. Her smile was warm and welcoming. "Come sit by the fire, Sam," she offered.

Sam's mouth went dry. There was something bewitching about her firelit eyes and slow speech. Her body curled into the contours of the big chair she was sitting in with feline grace. She traced one fingertip on the rim of her brandy glass in an absent elegant fashion. "You must be starved," she said sympathetically. "I have some

excellent cheese fondue heating." Sam noticed the iron kettle as he drew nearer to the fire. Amanda picked up the extra brandy glass and held it out. Sam took it from her hand feeling the cool brush of her fingertips.

He brought himself to his senses with a guilty start. "I-I'm sorry," he said for no apparent reason. "I mean for staring. It must be the storm." He blushed and turned away from her strange mesmerizing eyes. He felt lost without Al. He kept expecting his friend to make an appearance at any moment to tell him his purpose here. Something was wrong... Sam could feel it, but couldn't pin it down. He sniffed the brandy. The heady fumes burned his nostrils and warmed his senses.

Amanda chuckled. "Please don't apologize. I'm extremely flattered. You don't know how long it's been since a man was distracted by my looks."

"Somehow, I find that very hard to believe," he disagreed.

"You're charming!" she said, amused and delighted. "I'm so glad you happened by!"

"Believe me, so am I," Sam replied. He turned his back to the flames. "I'd be dead otherwise." Amanda looked uncomfortable and Sam was abruptly reminded of the friend she said was lost. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," he apologized.

She looked down into her glass. The sweep of her black lashes shadowing her cheeks. "It's alright. All these lonely hours. I've had time to accept the facts. I'm just so glad you found this place! You'll never know how glad." She looked up, her eyes shining wet with tears. "I was going mad, shut in this place all alone. Is there anything worse than being trapped in a romantic ski lodge alone?"

"I can think of a few things," Sam said quietly.

Amanda got to her feet. "Would you think I was completely crazy if I asked you to hold me?"

"No," Sam said, understanding some of what she must have gone through, trapped and worried not just for herself but for her boyfriend who was now most likely dead. He wrapped her in the comfort of his arms and felt a shiver run through her body. Her head rested on his shoulder.

"You have no idea what it's like to be so alone, completely alone for what seems like ages. Thinking you'll always be that way. You're going to die that way. I swore it wasn't going to happen to me!" She rocked her head back. Her wet eyes held a glimmer of a smile. "And see?" she said. "Here you are."

He held her tighter. "I know what it's like," he said seriously and cradled her head in his hand.

Amanda smiled. "Yes, I believe you do...." She raised herself on tiptoe to press her lips against his. They tasted of brandy. She pulled at his mouth with an eagerness that kindled alarming reactions.

Sam pulled away. "Amanda...."

She put her hands around his waist and arched her back swinging slightly from side to side with a warm inviting smile. She tilted her head and closed her eyes. "Oh," she sighed deeply. "I feel like a weight has been lifted off my soul. Maybe you can't understand, but you're like an answer to a prayer." She let go of him and stood apart with her hands folded and clasped to her breast. "I feel warm...."

Embarrassed but moved, Sam sipped cautiously at the brandy. "I think you've had a little too much of this."

"No," she denied. "I am giddy, but it's not the brandy."

"You don't know me," Sam reminded her.

She opened her dark eyes; they glowed above a mystical smile. "You're a man. A lonely man, who's lost.... Isn't that you?"

Sam took a bigger sip of the fiery liquor. There was an answering pulse in his groin that spoke more eloquently than any words he could find to answer.

As if she knew, she swayed languidly against him. "I'm a woman. A lonely woman. Perhaps the loneliness has made me mad, or maybe I was mad to begin with. You don't seem like a stranger to me. You seem like a kindred spirit seeking haven from the storm. I think we have both lost something. Don't look so surprised. It's in your eyes. Sam Beckett, you are a man who desperately wants... something. And I am a woman... who desperately wants." Her eyes seemed to swallow his vision. They were dark like shadows you think you can pierce if you just stare hard enough. He put his arm around her and kissed her. She molded her slim body to his and ran her fingers through his hair.

Sam had enough presence of mind to know he had lost control. The situation was surreal, but like the woman in his arms impossible to resist. Some of her desperation mirrored his own. An emptiness that cried out to be filled echoed in bodies that longed to be held. Her slender neck was like a piece of living porcelain in his hand. Her soft curls draped across the back of his wrists and tickled his skin. Her arms were around his shoulders. His were around her waist. He squeezed her firmly just to feel the warmth of her guttural laugh. They sank to the warm furs that carpeted the floor. Amanda ran her hands up beneath his shirt and kneaded the muscles of his back, while her lips kissed his throat.

The fire crackled and snapped spitting sparks up the flume. "Oh, the fondue!" she exclaimed and rushed to rescue it from the heat. Sam laughed as he watched her frantically struggle with the bubbling pot. Her teeth when she smiled were as white as the moonlit snow outside. "Make yourself useful. Open the wine!" she scolded pointing to the bottle on one of the end tables. Sam reached for it, absently noting the 1942 label. He almost commented on it but then a wine label was no indication of the present date. Still 1953 was earliest year he leaped into. And this would still be a respectively aged wine then. He opened the bottle and set it on the hearth and reached back for the tray that held the glasses. There was bread, sliced apples and meats desplayed for the fondue. He balanced the tray carefully and set the it down on the fur rug.

Amanda carefully brought the pot from the fire with a metal hook and a thick

potholder. She set the pot down on the potholder. When she removed the lid, a delicious aroma filled the air. Sam handed her a glass of wine. "To fate!" she offered a toast. "Here's to the friends it brings."

Sam clinked his glass to hers and drank. Amanda speared a piece of bread and swirled it in the cheese. She pursed her red lips and blew on it to cool it and then offered it to Sam. He took it off the end of her fork into his mouth marveling at how she managed to turn eating into such a sensual experience. As the meal progressed he could not remember ever being aroused by the act of eating dinner. There was a hunger no food could cure that burned in the pit of his stomach.

He felt as if he was struggling upward on a slippery incline and knew he wouldn't make it. The moral high ground was beyond his reach. While the wind howled outside and pried at the shutters, the fire cast dancing shadows into the corners of the lodge and glinted on the sightless eyes of the animals on the walls. Sam put more wood on the fire and felt the dizzy warmth of too much wine. Amanda cleared away the meal and knelt down on the rug. "Where were we?" she murmured.

Sam sat down with his back to the warm stone of the raised hearth. He ran his hand through his tousled hair. "Maybe it would be better if we didn't start where we left off," he said honestly.

"What's the matter, Sam? Have I failed to seduce you?" she asked, amused.

Sam's eyes were locked on hers. "No," he said, in a single breath that seemed to take all the air from his body.

Her mystic smile was lost in a sensual, smoldering gaze. "Don't you see we are kindred spirits. Lost in time. Haven't you ever wanted to feel that way with a lover? Like there is no future, no past, nothing but each other till the end of time."

Sam gasped. What she said pulled emotions from the depths of his heart and made it race. He could feel the blood pound in his ears. His eyes burned until Amanda was a blur of dark hair and white skin and a body that curved like an elegant cat. Her hands were warm as they took his and her lips were wet as they pulled at his mouth. She had her answer in the way he could not resist her pull. He let her pull his sweater over his head, shivering deeply as her nails grazed his skin. She set it aside and bent to trail her lips across his chest. Sam pulled her up to kiss her mouth and they turned to lay down on the soft fur.

Amanda eased out of her skin-tight clothing with a body that writhed against Sam's like an animal. She pulled free of her underclothing and let the silk garments slide across Sam's skin leaving the scent of Chanel in their wake.

He couldn't breath. He couldn't think and he felt like he should be resisting.... But she had pulled the last of his borrowed clothing away from his over-heated flesh and she was moving against him in long undulating stokes of her slender body. He rolled her beneath him and groaned with a lust so overpowering it was as if all the desire he ever felt in his life was concentrated in this one moment.

It was sex the way he only imagined it could be and yet... Amanda wrestled control from him time and time again and he began to feel like his responses were not so

much his own, but manufactured to meet her need. Once that thought came to him he began to pull back and try to regain his senses, but it was as if she had some control over that as well, and he would slip over the edge of an ever more treacherous abyss. Words he might have said went unformed and motions he could have made became caresses. There were times his lack of control made him laugh in a giddy throaty way he did not recognize and other times he felt his heart was pounding not so much from the sex as from panic. Through it all Amanda's eyes were like embers and her skin was like satin. He had never felt such power, such purely sexual heat pour off a woman the way it radiated from her. It was frightening.

Sam could not untangle his limbs from hers. He was exhausted and felt as if all the strength in his body had run out of him like liquid. Amanda's smile was warmly possessive. "Go to sleep lover." she purred into his ear. And obediently he drifted....

In a dream Sam could hear Al calling. He could hear the howl of the snow storm as if he were still outside. It was so loud it seemed to drown Al's voice. Sam wanted to open his eyes. He wanted to reply, Al sounded so frantic, but he could not move. He was so warm and so completely relaxed he just could not rouse himself to answer. There was something terribly wrong with this blissful sense of warm lassitude, alarm began to steal it away. He forced his eyes open and for a moment was not sure if he was truly awake or still dreaming. He saw timbers, old and black supporting a sky that was as cold and gray as a winter sea. He felt ice seeping into his skin. A chill so intense and penetrating it numbed his entire body. He stared up at the timbers and the cold gray sky and felt like he might be dying.

"Al?" he called out confused and disoriented. Hands took hold of his shoulders and pulled him upright. He looked into brown eyes that were not those of his old friend. These were depthless and lined with velvet black.

"Sam, what's wrong?" Amanda demanded.

The ski lodge was again around him and he realized that he must have been dreaming. "Nothing, a dream," he said trying to reassure her, but it was more than that he was almost sure. Al had still not appeared and Sam was getting worried.

"You know usually a man will cry out the name of another woman," Amanda ventured slyly. "Should I be jealous?"

"The thought brought a rush of embarrassed denial to Sam's cheeks and he sputtered. "No, it's nothing like that. It was just I dreamt my friend was in trouble, or maybe I was. He was calling to me, very worried about something."

She ran a slim hand through tousled auburn hair and stared thoughtfully into the still glowing fire. "One lost soul crying out to another?"

"I don't think my friend could get lost. At least it's never happened before."

Amanda leaned over to the hearth and tossed more wood on the fire. Sam sat up and helped her. Her hand felt warm on his back. "Men get lost...," she offered in a faraway voice.

Sam grinned ruefully. "You don't know Al. He's always been able to find me

before."

She leaned against him. "You didn't say you were expecting anyone."

Sam shook his head. "I'm... not. Not really."

She tilted her head and smiled slowly. "I'm glad. "I don't really feel like sharing."

"Al isn't that kind of friend," Sam said as her lips pressed against his. The strange dizzy feeling came over him again. His flesh tingled with a numbness that brought back the sensation of his dream. He reeled for a moment. His eyes closed and his sense of balance waverin, he shivered.

"What's the matter?"

Sam could hear her, but answering was suddenly difficult. "A chill," he said, trying to shake it off. He could feel her wrap her arms around him.

"A nightmare," she pronounced. "You dreamt of the cold, loneliness and loss," she whispered in his ear. Her warm breath shuddering against the nape of his neck. "This is a dream, a dream come true. You're not alone. You're not lost. You're here with me. The cold can't get you here."

Sam felt her hands stroke his back, warm and reassuring. He lay back at her gentle insistence. Her legs slid over his and moved slowly up and down rubbing warmth into them.

"You're not cold," she insisted.

It had the power to command and Sam answered truthfully, "No. I'm not now." But he did feel strange. And as he lay there he felt sleep coming over him even as Amanda kissed him. He smiled and kissed her lazily. "I feel strange." The sound of the wind came again, louder and more insistent. An odd disturbing thought tugged at his mind with persistent urgency. He opened his eyes and sat up.

Amanda was staring with alarm. "What?" she asked.

Sam shook his head. "It's Al. I know it doesn't make any sense, but I can't shake the idea that he needs me. I have to go out."

"Out? Are you out of your mind?" She held to his arm.

Sam laughed shortly. "I must be," he agreed ruefully, pulling on his clothing hastily. He sat on the hearth and pulled on his boots. "Look, I know it doesn't make any sense, but I have to go. I won't be long."

Amanda pulled the white rug around her shoulders. "Won't you? Don't make promises you can't keep, Sam." Her eyes were lambent and sad.

"Afraid I'll get lost?" he asked.

"Or found, does it matter?" she answered cryptically.

He didn't know what to say. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he promised and went to the door to shrug into his ski jacket.

Outside the night was absolute. Black shadows stretched across glittering ground and the wind blew swirls of snow up into the icy air. The stars were out and the moon seemed to have swept the sky clean of clouds. The wind echoed in the mountain stillness like something huge and lost howling in the distance. Sam could taste the ice and evergreen air in his mouth as he took his skis down and stepped into the bindings. The fresh snow was deep and powdery. He wished he had thought to bring the lantern but the snow and the light from above made it surprisingly easy to see the trail. Still, the cold was daunting.... He resolved not to go too far or stay out too long, wondering what the hell he was doing out here anyway.

He called for Al as he worked his way up slope. There were times he thought he heard something, but when he stopped to listen he couldn't pinpoint the location. The wind played tricks on his ears. He put his head down as the wind kicked up with sudden fury blowing the lose snow against him like a thousand wet hands to push him back. He would not give up, though he was not sure why when he had the warmth and comfort of the lodge and Amanda to return to. The wind's howl faded to a mournful hiss and the snow settled at Sam's feet. He looked up and saw her.

Her skin was pale and blue, her eyes were still as moist and brown and her dark hair floated in gentle waves around her lovely face. She was naked but no longer seemed warm and alive. Her lips formed his name. Her arms reached out for him in futile beckoning and then she crossed them over her breasts and smiled in sad acknowledgement of his horrified rejection. All of the sudden the snow and the trees became more distinct and Amanda more vague as if she had always been a trick of snow and shadows, but Sam knew differently.

He heard Al's voice, hoarse now from yelling his name. Sam turned and it seemed he opened his eyes for the first time in a long time for now it was daylight. Al's riotous clothing was a shock of vibrant color against the brilliant whiteness of the snow. Al walked without sinking across the deep drifts his expression jubilant with relief. "There you are! Jeeze, Sam where were you? Ziggy couldn't pin-point you. I've been looking all night for you!" he said in a rush. "Are you alright?"

Sam took a moment to catch his breath and realize he was lying in a snow bank, his skis still on and his poles still in his hands. He didn't remember falling. He squinted up at Al. "Yeah," he answered after a moment. "I think so, anyway." He struggled to rise. His body felt wooden and numb.

"You should be dead lying out here all night," Al exclaimed. He waved his cigar as he looked Sam up and down. "Not to say I'm sorry to see you okay, but all the same...."

"I wasn't out here all night. I was in a ski lodge not far from here."

"Ski lodge? What ski lodge?" Al punched the controls on his handlink and scowled. "The only info Ziggy has on a ski lodge is one that collapsed in the forties."

"Collapsed?" Sam said faintly.

"Yeah, as in fell down." Al eyed his friend with curiosity as he explained. "Seems there was this hellacious blizzard and the lodge collapsed under the weight of the snow. The guy you leaped into was up here scouting the site out. He has a plan to rebuild the old lodge on the original site. Ziggy says in the original history he died up here. A lot of guys have gone missing up here.... Anyway, Ziggy gives the idea a 98% chance of success if we can get you, I mean him, down to the ski resort. Things were iffy last night, but it looks like clear sailing now. You really had us worried Sam."

"I was alright. More than alright.... Al, what happened when the lodge collapsed. Was anyone killed?"

Al frowned and shrugged as he consulted the handlink. "One person, a woman was killed in the lodge, and another, her fiance, was found half-way down the mountain. He must have gone to get help."

"And she waited for him," Sam said quietly. "All this time. She must have been so lonely.... If I would have stayed there with her I'd have frozen to death." What he thought had been a dream of waking to the sky above him and the feeling of cold seeping into his flesh was the reality that Amanda had somehow kept him from seeing. He shuddered in horror, but part of it was sympathy for her and the terrible loneliness her restless spirit suffered.

"What's the matter, Sam? Who are you talking about?" Al insisted. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

It startled Sam. He shivered. "Yeah," he whispered. He thought of making love to her by the fire. The charming warmth of her eyes and the brilliance of her smile. The feeling of her warm silken skin sliding over his as her lips pulled at his mouth. He wondered if the men who died on this mountain were lured to their deaths or comforted in their passing by her ghost. He remembered the soft timbre of her voice saying. "You're not alone. You're not lost. You're here with me. The cold can't get you here." He forgave her for the deception of what may have been a deadly trap. He understood the unthinkable. "A ghost," he said to Al. "The ghost of a lonely woman."

"Really?" Al said with interest. "Was she beautiful?"

Sam laughed. "Like a dream come true," he said wistfully. He left it at that and began skiing down slope. He wondered as he followed the slope to the signs of a modern resort at the mountain's base, if developing the old lodge would give her the company she so desired, or if she would finally find her rest once the place was restored. In either case the people who stayed there were bound to find the place haunted....

Sam thrilled to the speed and pleasure of the new powder and the empty slopes, until he saw the bright colors of ski jackets and gear circa 1980's. He saw Al admiring a group of neon sheathed ski bunnies and he telemarked to a fancy stop some distance away. Al sauntered over eventually and Sam asked him. "Now what happens?"

"Well, Mark, the guy you leaped into, rebuilds the old lodge and it becomes a fashionable retreat for lovers, especially newlyweds. It's also famous for being..." Al looked up quickly.

"Let me guess," Sam interjected, "haunted." He looked from Al's pinched face to the mountain beyond. A warm breeze blew unaccountably from the glacial slope. It carried the scent of wood smoke and the vaguest caress of a woman's perfume. Sam shuddered as the force of a new leap swept him up into the unknown.

Q-UINELLA

(A quinella is a bet where the bettor picks the first two finishers in whichever order they finish. I looked it up-- your friendly zine publisher)

by

Kate Stone

"Pathetic aren't they?" said the handsome young man in the red and black uniform. His face was a grimace of disgruntled temper.

"Oh I don't know. They must pose some diversion. You certainly give them a lot of thought," answered his equally handsome companion in a matching uniform of blue and black. He plucked at his sleeve as if too preoccupied to notice the effect of his words on the man beside him. "Am I ambulating correctly?" he asked for the tenth time.

"You know you are. Shut up about it," the other snapped. He led them to a set of elaborate, real Terran wood, double doors. "This is Ten Forward another recreational facility. It's a lounge," he explained dissmissively.

"I like this emphasis on recreation."

"Oh that's them alright. Eat, sleep, recreate, conquer the known universe. That's humanity," he gesticulated dramatically.

His companion snorted. He slouched sardonically into the nearest booth. "Ever so much different than ourselves," he observed.

The sarcasm did not go unnoticed. The dark one smirked. "Yes, but they're so precocious. It's annoying in the extreme. They're unpredictable as well." He slumped down assuming the very picture of dejection.

"Don't despair. I said I'd help and I will. Just give me a moment to get my bearings. Where would you like to start?"

"At the top of course," the man in red replied with aristocratic destain.

"And where would that be?" his accomplice inquired.

"Jean Luc Picard the Captain. Oh and his insufferable side-kick William Riker."

"Oh yes them... And what do they call you?"

"Q, of course," he reminded imperiously.

"That's not very impressive," the other said doubtfully. "We are the Q, but really you could have at least picked a name."

"I was pressed for time," Q defended embarrassed.

"You're joking. And you call them pathetic? And while we're on the subject of identities; if you've taken the name of our race for personal use, what am I supposed to call myself? And also why are we in these ridiculous disguises?"

"Because they'd recognize me and you said you wanted to observe unnoticed!" Q shouted. Many heads turned at the disturbance. "These are two non-descript ensigns. We can go anywhere unquestioned."

"We could do that anyway."

"Yes, but it wouldn't be any fun."

"Right. I've decided to call myself Xvlonzyxquatil," Xvlonzyxquatil announced smugly.

Q gave an exasperated groan. "You can't call yourself that!"

"Why not?" Xvlonzyxquatil replied, offended.

"Well for one thing no one will be able to pronounce it. What's the point of giving yourself a name no one can pronounce? And for another thing, it's absurd, ludicrous. And I refuse to have anything at all to do with you if you insist on it!"

"Really old friend! So touchy. These creatures really have you at your wits end don't they? Alright, I'm open to suggestions," Xvlonzyxquatil said helpfully. He leaned back and folded his arms.

Q considered the problem with a flash of his old ebullient self. "It should be a name of ancient and therefore respected origins, something short and authoritative," he pondered.

"Yes, absolutely. Oh, do go on!" the about to be named member of the Continuum prompted.

Q frowned and then announced authoritatively. "Bob. I think you should call yourself Bob."

"Bob," the other repeated experimenting with the sound. "I like it. How about Bob the omnipotent? Or Bob the omnipresent?"

Q waved his hand. "Fine, fine, fine. If we run into a formal occasion you can even add fanfare."

"Fabulous," said Bob. "Now, you were saying?"

"I haven't been able to get anywhere with Jean-Luc. I'm beginning to think he's incorruptible."

"Upsetting," Bob agreed sympathetically.

"Believe me I've tried," complained Q.

Bob shrugged. "If anyone could drag an entire race through the mire of corruption based on the foibles of one man, you could my friend. I've every confidence that you are without doubt the best we have at this sort of thing."

Q glowered at the underhanded compliment. "Are you going to offer something constructive or just be obsequious?"

"I can do both," Bob said gaily. "Anyway, as I see it you've done your usual flashy bit, come on strong as is your wont. Perhaps you could try a more subtle, more devious and yet more simple approach."

Q leaned forward as Bob did until their faces were mere inches apart. "Why do you think I called you?" Both entities smiled deviously.

Riker came in, compelled without knowing it. He looked around for a moment and then settled down at his usual table. Q pointed him out to Bob. With dripping derision he outlined Riker's character traits. Bob listened attentively effectively sifting through the sarcasm and exaggerations with the ease of long practice. What emerged was both challenging and intriguing. Bob was effectively captivated.

"And you say you want to take some the starch out of his stiff neck?" Bob considered.

"Much more than that. Riker's a sensualist; the worst sort," he sneered.

"Won't admit it?" Bob guessed.

Q squirmed. "Won't give into it," he supplied. "He's a natural leader too, but he won't give into that either. You know I've offered him virtual Godhood? What can I say? The man won't even take command of his own ship. His precious Federation has offered him command three times!"

Bob studied their subject with a frown. "Puzzling. Why is that?"

Q sighed. "He's enamored of Jean-Luc I suppose. How should I know?"

Bob smiled consideringly, but he kept his thoughts to himself. "Let's go take a look at this Captain of yours," he suggested.

Q followed still in his childish fit of sour spirits. In the corridor Bob turned into a stylish, woman in her forties, slim, fit, with gray eyes and a slick quaff of silver hair.

"Bob!" Q lamented, even as he admired the sensuous sway of Bob's new walk.

Bob arched her eyebrow. "I was tired of that stupid false image. This is more me. The human version anyway," said Bob in her new melodious voice. "Don't be such a bore."

"Bore!" Q exclaimed. He was deeply offended. "I am not a bore!" The very idea mortified him.

Bob patted him. "Of course not. Forgive me," she placated.

"Sure, Bob," he gave the name a comic inflection, deciding not to tell her it was a completely ridiculous name for her present persona.

He brightened when they arrived on the bridge. He was about to spring into his normal persona and suddenly found himself both mute and unable to do much of anything but follow Bob. "Sorry darling," she explained telepathically. "But you know how impetuous you can be."

Telepathically Q answered with a time honored Continuum obscenity.

They observed the bridge for the better part of an hour without being questioned since Bob was shielding them under a cloak of what she called mundane obscurity. It was her specialty and utterly beyond Q's scope or patience. Bob knew Q's limits and led them off the bridge. "I suggest we try observing sans corporeal form," Bob suggested.

Q agreed still vexed and grumbling. "I'll give you an hour to come up with something entertaining enough to make up for all of this, but I warn you it had better be good."

Bob ignored his sour attitude. "I promised to cheer you up."

Q shook his head. "Ha! You did not. This was a bet, remember? You bet me that you could come up with a better method of demeaning these people than I have."

"So I did. And I will. Trust me," Bob assured airily. "I've already formed an idea, but first tell me more about Picard. Was he ever, oh what's the word... married?"

"No. You're not planning to seduce him are you?" Q inquired, unimpressed.

"Nothing so provincial," Bob dismissed the idea. But it was clear the notion had a certain seductive appeal. "Does he have children? A lover?"

"No, no and no. Picard is married to his career. He's utterly pedantic, that's what's so infuriating about him. I did come across a woman he fancied. A remarkable creature named Vash. I thought she might be his Achilles heal."

"Spare me the details. Oh, yes... I've already heard the details, remember?"

"I'm never getting drunk with you again," Q complained.

The lift doors opened and Picard joined them. "Deck thirty-six," he commanded. He smiled at the two new officers. "You're new," he said, frowning because he

couldn't place either of them.

Bob smiled beguilingly and edged closer. Her body language was already seductive. "Not all that new," she said smokily.

Picard was instantly discomforted. He blushed and seemed flustered. This fascinated Q who'd seen this side of Picard often enough but had never been able to take meaningful advantage of it. "I'm ensign Smith," he supplied firmly.

Bob smiled silkily and extended her hand. "I am Bob," she offered.

Picard's brow furrowed. "Bob?"

"A nickname," Q said quickly. "Easier to pronounce than Xvlonzyxquatil."

Picard smiled and straightened with recovered aplomb. "I see. Well welcome aboard the Enterprise, ensign Smith, ensign..uh, er, Bob."

"Thank you, Captain," Bob said warmly. She allowed her shining eyes to peer into the captain's. She seemed to enjoy the way it made the dignified man uneasy.

Q watched the exchange with lively interest. He noted the way the captain exited the lift with uncharacteristic haste. He was almost awkward for all his dignified stance.

Bob swung her elegantly quaffed head to regard Q with a superior smile of triumph. "I now know all I need to know," she announced. Her lips curved sweetly.

"You said you weren't out to seduce him," Q reminded.

Bob laughed. "Actually I'd love to, but it wouldn't accomplish anything really except possibly give him the time of his life and that's not what you want." She smiled regretfully.

"What then?" Q asked, impatient.

"Nothing really." Bob studied her perfect nails. "Only ruin his career which you say to date has been the love of his life."

"How?" Q demanded in disbelief.

"He'll do it himself. He'll leave it behind. And as for Riker... well, exploiting his sensualist nature and corrupting his loyalty to Picard, I plan to do that at the same time."

"Phaugh!" Q derided. "Impossible!" But his sharp eyes were glittering with curiosity.

"If you're going to be nasty, I won't tell you," Bob teased.

"Oh, come on," Q wheedled. "Remember what I promised? If you can do all this, it would fulfill our bet."

Bob transported them back to stand on the exterior of the ship. "Your problem is you think too drastically. Your flare for the dramatic puts people on the defensive," she began eagerly. "But with subtlety, with guile and just a push in the wrong direction we can get them to accomplish our goals themselves."

"How!" roared Q in vexation.

Swaying with delight Bob laughed. "Oh it's just too delightful!" She put her arms around Q's broad shoulders and whispered. "We make them lovers!"

"No!" Q gasped, thrilled.

"Yes!" Bob insisted. "It's perfect!"

"They'd never believe it. Trust me they're both very perceptive."

Bob danced back. Her eyes were shining with devious calculation. She was positively ecstatic. "Your way no doubt!" she scoffed. "Nothing vulgar and abrupt. And I do agree they will instinctively feel there is something wrong with their relationship. The cure for that is to give them something wrong <u>with</u> their relationship, something particularly thorny to solve that will misdirect their attentions. And we make it so they've been lovers for a long time," she outlined eagerly.

"The others would never believe it. They'd interfere. You don't know these people. They're annoyingly resourceful," Q objected.

Bob shook her head gently. "I've thought of that already. We make all the senior staff aware of their relationship. Everything's long since been sorted out. You know them well enough. Correct me if I'm wrong but I'll bet that, even leaving them all their objections and individual views, their personal and professional loyalties will allow them to accept the two people they most admire being in love."

Q slowly grinned. "Yes," he exclaimed admiringly. "It just might."

"We don't even have to do all that much, Picard and Riker already have a great deal of respect and feelings of friendship for one another. Riker is not aligned strongly with any woman and Picard," she said warmly. "Picard is uncomfortable around available even willing females. Perhaps he'd welcome a masculine presence, someone similar to himself."

"Not Picard," Q objected again. He was sure.

Bob laughed. "You underestimate him. Here's a man dedicated to exploring the unknown, striving to understand and accept all kinds of people. Let him question and self-analyze the cause and object of his love, everyone does that."

"Riker's a confirmed womanizer!" Q exclaimed.

Bob was sublime. "You said he's a sensualist and the same reasons apply to him as to Picard, plus you already told me he stays in a secondary position because of his attachment to his captain."

Q thought this over a moment as he paced the deck of the ship. "Yes, but how does this ruin their careers. Even a tedious organization like the Federation must surely recognize unions of the same sex. It is after all predominately human, no matter how many worlds involved. And as humans are so fond of saying, boys will be boys."

"Ah but that's where our diverting problem for our two star crossed lovers, love that expression, comes in! We arrange another offer of command for Riker, something he can't refuse."

Q jumped on the idea enthusiastically. "I have just the thing," he responded. "For some time the Federation, particularly the Enterprise, have been increasingly involved in the Klingon Empire. Riker even served on one of their vessels. The offer of a Klingon ship would be something he could not refuse."

Bob was impressed. "That's the old Q we know and love!" she congratulated.

In answer Q assumed his normal human persona with a huge sigh of relief. "This just might work. Even if it doesn't, it would be worth it just to witness how they consummate our little version of reality. If they consummate it."

Bob was confident. "Oh they will. Trust me. And without any interference from us."

"That, I'd love to see," Q admitted.

Bob arched an eyebrow in astonishment. "Really?" she asked.

Instantly they were in Picard's quarters. Q looked around briefly and confided nervously, "Purely an expression of speech."

"By the way, we're invisible," Bob informed, and stepped out of the way for Jean Luc who was dressed in nightshirt and shorts and engrossed in a book as he walked through the suite.

The door whisked open without the customary permission sought. Picard looked up and smiled. "Number One," he greeted.

"I'm off duty and so are you," Riker answered with a smile.

"Will," Picard amended. "Sorry, I was thoroughly distracted."

Riker forgave him easily. "Good book?"

"Yes. A classic. A Year In Provence. Have you read it?" Picard inquired brightly.

Riker took the book from him gently. "No," he admitted softly. His other hand slowly cradled Picard's head. His kiss was warm and returned with equal measure. "I thought," he said huskily, "that you were going to rest?"

"I thought we've had this conversation before," Picard replied tartly. "We agreed you wouldn't extend your first officer prerogatives to this room if I wouldn't exercise mine as captain."

Riker grinned, his blue eyes glittered tenderly. "I stand corrected, sir," he teased. He let his hand drop with a gesture of good natured surrender.

Picard smiled and nodded. After a moment's hesitation he said wonderingly. "You know the oddest thing just happened."

"What?"

"When you kissed me just now I had the strangest sensation. It was as if it were the first time." He laughed softly. "Your beard scratched me."

Will looked startled. "You want me to shave it?"

"No. By no means. I like how it makes you look."

"Then why are you looking at me like that?" Riker inquired, amused but uneasy.

Picard cocked his head and then seemed to mentally shake himself. "It's just that saying that felt strange. I don't know what's got into me. I feel like we've never done this before."

Riker scowled. "Maybe I should go out and come in again?" he offered.

Picard reached out in apology. "Don't be foolish," he drew him over to sit down. "I didn't mean to distress you. It's just that this all seems new again."

Riker grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment. I'd hate to be taken for granted. Honestly I know what you mean. I suppose this will never seem entirely comfortable."

Picard nodded and went to the replicator. He ordered Riker coffee and himself tea. "You were going to say normal," he accused as he sat down. "No, don't protest. I suppose we've both thought of it off and on. Neither one of us expected to be in a same-sex relationship."

Riker tensed. His concern evident in his expressive face. "You talk like you regret it," he said unhappily.

Jean-Luc stared levelly into those pained blue eyes. "I could never regret having you in my life, but I resigned myself to a solitary existence a long time before we ever met. You had different expectations."

"Yes," Riker agreed. "To find someone, some day, that I could respect and admire, someone I could share my life and my love with. I hoped it would be someone who would understand my dedication to Starfleet and my commitment to all its ideals. I thought I found that person. Are you telling me I'm wrong?" His strong voice became husky and his eyes refused to look away, demanding a reply.

Picard capitulated. "I've upset you."

"You're damn right you upset me!" Riker shouted. "What did you expect? Tell me

what you're thinking Jean-Luc, because I'm having trouble following." He was agitated and looked about ready to jump to his feet.

Picard stayed him with a gentle hand. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me."

Riker sighed. "I shouldn't be so defensive. You were just being honest." He looked bleak, and Picard noted this with a twinge of guilt.

"I hurt you and that's not what I meant," Jean-Luc said heavily. "All I meant to say is that for whatever reason I feel like this is all new. I didn't say this was bad, in fact it's quite... stimulating."

"Stimulating?" Riker responded with rekindled humor. "Stimulating? I think I like the sound of that."

Picard felt his misgivings melt away. He met Riker's sapphire eyes with an easy grin. He felt an irresistible urge to lean forward and kiss his mouth one more time.

Q watching on the other side of the room nudged Bob. "I thought you said we wouldn't have to do anything? You're influencing Picard."

"I said, a little push in the wrong direction," Bob replied defensively.

"Riker seems to be taking this alarmingly well," Q observed.

The two Starship officers on the couch were unaware of the aliens observing them. Picard was acting on his overwhelming desire to kiss his first officer. Riker was returning it artfully.

"And now let's leave them alone," Bob decided.

Q was still protesting when she zapped them out of the room.

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Jean-Luc didn't know why his intimate relationship with Will seemed abruptly so unreal. He hadn't thought anything of it earlier. It was as if his lover came through his door an hour ago for the first time even though it was more like the thousandth time.

He regretted the turmoil he'd caused by admitting his uneasiness. He truly hadn't meant to hurt Riker, but then of course such an idea would. He realized what it sounded like and wondered where his head was that would just blurt out something like that. He was confident he could tell his lover anything, but the method he used was indelicate, completely insensitive.

Riker turned away from his computer terminal. "You're beating yourself up about us aren't you?" he accused insightfully.

Startled Picard set his book down. "You're a mind reader now?"

Riker regarded him with a slight smile. "I know you too well," he said. "I've been thinking about what you said. You just startled me that's all. Under any other circumstances I would have been able to discuss it rationally. I'm sorry I blew up. You're right of course, this does strike me as strange sometimes. Sometimes I can't believe us. It doesn't seem quite real somehow." The big man considered the idea with his usual care, but his heart was in his eyes when he said, "I just need to know one thing."

Picard raised his hand. "No regrets," he anticipated the question.

Riker instantly relaxed. "Good, because I was just thinking that the way I think doesn't always coincide with the way I feel. This," he gestured to the two of them and their shared living space. "This feels good to me. When I think of how close we are I feel amazed, surprised, but only in the best of ways. I thought you did too."

Picard got up from his chair and walked to where Riker was sitting. He touched the soft dark hair and tenderly traced the bearded chin. He crouched down with his hands on Riker's strong thighs. "I do, Will. It's just so far out of my expectations sometimes my mind has trouble accepting what my heart dictates."

Wanting to believe, Riker covered Jean-Luc's hands with his own. "And what does your heart tell you?"

"That we were meant for one another. That you are more than I ever anticipated. Will, I am comfortable around you the way I've never been with any other person. This relationship should be complicated, but it's so simple that I wonder what took us so long."

Riker bent forward slowly claiming a kiss to seal the sincerity of the words. "A clear case of not seeing the forest for the trees," he said.

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Jean-Luc's cool mouth did feel hard and unfamiliar today, and this thought had disturbed him more when Picard voiced his doubts. It echoed in Riker's mind and made him afraid, but the truth was, it was always easier for him to dismiss the morality questions that plagued the captain. Jean-Luc had been raised in old Earth French traditions, and Riker was a pure product of modern times. The idea of a male lover had never before appealed to him, but it was easier for him than Jean-Luc. He was attracted to the captain in all ways, intellectually, emotionally and physically. The physical attraction had been a little shocking to them both.

He remembered when they came together. No momentous mission to throw them over this hurdle. No, it had come quite unexpectedly. They were in this same room. It was after an alien probe had taken over Jean-Luc, making him live an entire life-time in an alien culture. The experience had shaken the captain as so few things did. He was trying to explain the after effects, more than the experience. How it had made him realize how precious his own life-span was, the inter-connections between people. He had no real regrets about not starting a family until after this experience. In a rare vulnerable moment he confided that he felt alone, more alone now than he'd ever felt in his life.

Riker reached out. In that one moment he'd felt such love, such sympathy, words would not have done his feeling justice. He wanted to say that Jean-Luc would always have him. The sentiment translated into action. Amazing them both Jean Luc responded to his embrace with a sudden passionate strength. In the next instant their lips met and a flare of mutual desire was kindled for the first time.

Unexpected, powerful sexual attraction followed, and from there the relationship grew and deepened into something unique and yet old. They simply became one unit without seam, completing each other.

It did not take long for the crew to catch on. That had been the most awkward, especially for Jean-Luc. He was intensely private, and this relationship caught him completely off guard, but he was too strong to give in to cowardly deception.

Riker had been deeply moved. It continued to affect him with amazing tenderness that Picard was as open to others about their love. After all this was Captain Jean-Luc Picard and at times the very concept of the two of them together still astounded him. It wasn't that he didn't feel worthy, on the contrary their relationship filled him with an almost giddy pride, he did feel overwhelmed sometimes, even after all this time. His breath shook in his chest. "Jean-Luc I..."

"I know," the Captain completed with a smile.

Riker closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Jean-Luc's. He didn't know when they adopted this private expression of love, but it was uniquely theirs. Sometimes he felt they could almost communicate telepathically with this touch.

Jean Luc rose and dug through his private cache of liquor. He poured them both an equal measure of his treasured brandy. His lips were quirked in a wry smile and he sighed as he set the snifters down. "I think it's time we talked about that communique from Star Fleet you've been trying to hide," he said with mild reproach.

Riker was startled. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I only suspected."

Will snorted. "And I thought I was a poker player," he said admiringly. "It's another offer of comand. This time they're holding the name of the ship contingent on my acceptance."

Picard frowned. "That's unheard of, especially if they want to entice you."

"Maybe a mystery is the best way," Riker answered with false lightness. "Anyway they should know by now what the answer is." He watched as Picard's expression darkened and the older man turned away to contemplate the stars racing by outside the view port.

"You know my feelings on this. We've had this discussion more than once," Picard reminded.

Riker stood defiantly but his voice and his hands, where they rested on the smaller man's tense shoulders, were gentle. "You could live with that? After all we've been through, all we've come to be for one another. You'd be happy to have us go our separate ways?"

"Happy?" Picard repeated heavily. "No, never that, but I wouldn't let my personal loss get in the way of your career, and neither should you." He turned and met the smoldering blue eyes with candid resolve. "You know, Will, Starfleet believes you are holding out for the Enterprise."

"They'd never give her to me without a previous captaincy under my belt," Riker said harshly.

"Don't you see? Only by leaving can you hope to return," Picard enlightened.

But Riker wasn't behind him on this line of thought. His expression hardened to contain an old hurt. "But you wouldn't be here," he said with difficulty.

Ah, thought Jean-Luc taking a mental step back. Here was the problem. Riker's eyes were full to the brim, but his expression was resolute and fearless. "You can't keep me safe forever, Will. Having you here is no guarantee. Even so, eventually I'll retire, or be reassigned, even promoted. My point is, separation will come. It must for officers of our rank and abilities."

"I don't have to like it," Will exclaimed bitterly. "And I will postpone it to the best of my ability."

"And I am grateful," Picard insisted. "But I'm not selfish enough to let you."

"Aren't we jumping to conclusions?" Will said explosively. "I'm not about to accept a posting blindly. I'll wait to see what they have to say when we reach Starbase 17."

"They won't discuss it over channels?" Picard queried.

"No, and I haven't pressed them," Will snapped in irritation.

They were both curious and a little alarmed. Picard wondered outloud. "It must be something they feel you can't refuse. It could be it isn't you who's moving on."

This startled Riker who plainly had not considered Picard leaving. "Damn it. I never thought of that. Maybe they're promoting you? It was only a matter of time."

"Now who's jumping to conclusions?" Picard said fondly.

Will conceded the point graciously. "Alright, but the question is, what do we do about it, about us?" he asked seriously. "I mean if," he amended, "when we have to separate?"

Picard felt a rush of real dread. "This is happening too soon."

Riker laughed shortly. "That's my line. I feel like I've been fighting this for a long time, but now circumstances seem to be rushing me into a place I don't want to be." He ran his hands through his hair in a gesture borrowed from the way Picard would run his hands over his smooth pate.

"Will," Picard took a firm hold on Riker's upper arms. "Whatever happens won't change the way we feel. These kinds of separations are classic within Starfleet. That's why we have the unwritten law not to get involved with those we serve with. You know that."

"It doesn't make it any easier to live with," Will answered bleakly. "You were right; this all feels new."

"Maybe there's a reason," Picard said with slow deliberation. He squeezed Riker's arms with brisk affection and let them go.

"You mean because we may be losing each other," Riker stated with grim realization. "You may be right."

"Don't be so melodramatic," Picard chided, but he looked decidedly unhappy. "We're lucky to have had this much. There's always been something rather clandestine to our..."

"Affair," Will supplied helpfully.

"Relationship," Picard corrected. He seemed to stop as if something crossed his mind and then dismissed the feeling. He grinned as he saw Riker bracing himself for another emotional go-around. He wondered what had him on such an edge. He was positively irascible tonight.

Confused, Will stared at him inquiringly. "What?" he asked finally.

"I seem to be spoiling for a fight tonight. I don't know why," Jean-Luc admitted. "maybe the thought of separation disturbs me more than I'd like to let on. I never realized how... addicting a long term relationship would be. You'd be a very difficult habit to break, Will Riker."

Will laughed obligingly. "I'm glad to hear it."

"I can be a bit too conciliatory at times," Picard said with self-reproach. "I sound like a pompous ass, blathering on about how normal it is for Starfleet officers to endure separation!" he said with agitation. "When the truth is I hate it."

Whatever distress he imagined his outburst would engender was not forthcoming. Will seemed quite pleased. His eyes sparkled with a challenging humor. "You are spoiling for a fight aren't you?" he observed.

"You're actually pleased I'm angry," Picard said, puzzled.

"Damn right I am. I was a little worried about how well you were taking something that was tearing me up inside," Will responded. His sly poker grin was lighting up his face.

Picard was suspicious. "If you're about to say, I'm gorgeous when angry--" he snarled.

Will started laughing. "The thought never crossed my mind!" he protested his innocence. "But you are damn sexy, Captain," he stated with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, God!" Jean-Luc groaned with exasperation. He resisted urge to smack some respect into his irreverent lover, but realized as the thought took shape that there was a lot more to it than that. He wanted to match his sudden irascible mood against Riker's bear-like strength, in a contest that had nothing to do with sportsmanship...

Riker caught his intent almost instantly. He started walking backwards to their bedroom. His hands were open and spread in a gesture that could evoking either a jovial plea for clemency or the opening moves of Greco wrestling. "Wait a minute, Jean-Luc!" he protested. "I was only teasing!" But he was clearly enjoying the game. He allowed himself to be driven to the bedroom.

"Take off that uniform, mister!" Picard ordered, mock serious.

"Aye, aye, sir," Riker with equal playfulness.

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Q was standing just outside the porthole looking in. The airless void and warp speed did not effect him, but the scene before him caused him to peer through his fingers like a child. "If I hadn't seen this with my own eyes, I would never believe it!" he muttered.

"I can't believe we're standing here like a couple of voyeurs!" Bob exclaimed peevishly. "It's beyond bad taste, and it should be beneath us."

"Speaking of beneath," Q said provocatively. "It appears Picard maintains his position as top man."

Bob gave up her disdainful posture immediately to peer over Q's shoulder.

"Ha! Made you look!" Q crowed.

Bob zapped them both back to their table in Ten Forward. Her expression was insufferably smug. "This has gone better than even I hoped," she announced proudly.

Q smirked, but was forced to admit, "It does seem to be working. Who would have believed it? Oh, if only I thought of this sooner, I'd take Riker's place!"

Bob's eyes went wide. Her mouth formed a perfect O of shocked disgust.

Q shrugged. "Well?" he defended. "You practically threw yourself at Picard."

Bob grimaced. "Yes but I had no intention of copulating with, with a... mortal," she said with obvious repulsion. "I mean the very idea! One could expire right in the middle of..."

"Don't flatter yourself!" Q growled sarcastically. He slouched back in the comfortable chair. His arrogant confidence was seeping back. He was nearly returned to his old irreverent irrepressible self. It felt good. He couldn't wait to see the look on Jean Luc's face when he revealed his triumph. It would be hard to wait until Picard resigned his commission. He had strong doubts Picard would do that even for Riker. In any case, pompous, pedantic Picard had actually tumbled into bed with his libidinous first officer. It really was too rich. The only thing that really concerned him was that Bob might succeed where he had failed. He would never live it down in the Continuum. Bob would see to that.

Bob stretched her shapely legs and crossed her ankles on the table's edge. Her expression was pure conceit. Her feline smile a flourish of imperious superiority.

"Oh don't give me that look!" Q warned with an annoyed mockery. "The game's not over yet!"

"I'm telling you, Q," Bob said serenely unruffled. "If you would have taken a feminine approach, you would come up with this a long time ago. In the future don't be so... limited." She smiled wickedly.

"You're enjoying this too much," Q complained.

Bob transported them to the foot of Picard's bed. "What's not to enjoy?" she said telepathically.

Q stared with his mouth hanging open in astonishment.

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Jean-Luc lay in Riker's arms listening to the soft sound of Will's heart thumping in his barrel chest. He decided he liked the sensation, even the soft curls of chest hair beneath his cheek. Will was... uninhibited, he considered with a smile of pure lascivious approbation.

Last night had been exhausting, exhilarating and full of carnal experimentation. It was totally unlike any encounter he had ever experienced, even with Will. He was certain, even though they'd been together so long. Picard knew himself to be

woefully prudent, even reclusive in his circumspection. He admired Riker's vibrant sensuality and courage. Will drew him out and ignited that part of himself that he held in with such old fashioned constraint. It was ribald and refreshing to be able to be as physical and demanding as he wanted with a mate, and still be able to be giving and affectionate. Jean-Luc lay very still, but a strange realization filled him with surging power. He had to force himself not to move. Naming the feeling was both simple and complex. He was happy, but such a complete and over-powering emotion seemed worth a more elaborate label. He had never known such a time of such absolute joy and comfort. It was as if a light shone into a deep recess of his being and he was able to say with conviction, "ah, yes, there it is. The right one, the right place, the right time." He felt as if he'd found perfection on the very eve of losing it. This would not be like sending his first officer off on an away mission. He'd been too used to that before they'd become lovers to have it adversely effect him after.

He slowly disentangled himself from Riker's sleep laden arms. The power of his grief was suddenly chilling him. He vowed as looked down at the naked younger man that he would not let him know how profoundly the loss of their intimacy affected him. Riker would never leave if he knew; nothing in the universe could make him, not if he knew it would break his lover's heart. A lesser man than Will Riker would make Picard scorn the romantic notion, but he knew without doubt the strength of Will's devotion.

Jean-Luc got up and put on a robe. He ordered black coffee instead of his favorite tea. He rubbed his temples trying to stave off a headache. To go from anger, to euphoria to intense regret was like emotionally going through warp. Taking his coffee from the replicator to his favorite reading chair he sat in the treasured solitude and quiet. There was so little of it now, but he didn't relish living alone again. Funny, he'd always thought he was happy on his own. Will fit so easily into his life it was less like making room for another than filling empty space with more of himself. As if he'd been expanded in some marvelous new way. They were part of one another like these quarters were now a mix of both their belongings, hobbies; and tastes. They came and went with such casual understanding that there was none of the stress and friction he'd known even just sharing a room at the academy let alone the relationships he'd had with women.

The few times he'd been in love. He'd also been appalled by the idea of sharing his private space continually. The idea of marriage did not comfort him and he'd always known, for better or worse that he chose to live alone. Will changed all that with such simplicity. Picard never tired of his stalwart companion even though they spent much of their professional time together as Captain and First officer and most of their private time as well. Will still had his poker nights and his concerts just as he had his own pursuits, but it was comforting to know that in the end the other was always there to come home to. He would miss that. He would miss sharing his bed with Will's warm presence.

Why did that thought still astound him? He wondered but could not discern the cause. Instead he set himself to wondering what Starfleet had in mind. Try as he might he could not think of what ship had come available. Perhaps an ugly court marshal or retirement was in the works for some reluctant captain. It could always be a promotion somewhere along the line. Will was a good choice to promote to any ship. He ran his thoughts over the roster of names and wondered where an opening would most likely be. It made him feel as if he'd not been paying attention to fleet

internal politics. He berated himself for not noticing being so distracted.

"I smelled coffee," said a gruff voice from the bedroom doorway. Riker's hair was uncombed and his robe was tied in his typically thoughtless fashion. His concern was transparent.

"I'm sorry I waked you," Jean-Luc replied. He could feel himself smiling foolishly, as his lover shuffled forward to steal his cup. "You're up early," he chided.

Will stretched and yawned as he made his way to the replicator. "Coffee, black. Pancakes with maple syrup, sausage, bacon and two eggs sunnyside up," he ordered. He looked sheepishly at Picard. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day," he excused. his order came as a bowl of cut fruit, wheat toast and the coffee.

"I programmed the replicator to replace your usual order with this," Picard explained.

Will sighed hugely. "I'm touched," he answered sarcastically. He took his tray to the table.

"Actually, it was doctor Crusher's suggestion," Jean-Luc defended amiably. "She says she already prescribed a diet, but you don't seem to be following her recommendation."

"Have you ever been on one of Beverly's diets?" Will questioned testily. "No of course not," he grumbled.

Jean-Luc grinned. "Perhaps if you ate what I do?"

Will scowled and picked at his replicated fruit. Eventually, he shared Jean-Luc's humor. "Sure. Why not?" he agreed.

Q was sitting in a nearby arrangement of flowers. He turned to Bob who shared his three inch height. "This is too hideously domestic for words," he observed with disgust.

"I find it charming," Bob protested. "They're adorable."

Q cocked his head. "Adorable? Jean-Luc, Will Riker? Egad!" He looked convincingly ill.

Picard frowned. "Do you hear something?"

Will shook his head. "Like what?"

"It's nothing. I thought I heard my name."

"That does it," Will exclaimed. "I'm not eating this!" He got up and returned to the replicator. "Computer over-ride diet and give me my pancakes with butter and maple syrup." A large stack of hot pancakes arrived dripping with a thick amber syrup. Riker grinned triumphantly. "Now this is breakfast!"

Q groaned expressively. "We're out of here!"

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Starbase seventeen was an old base. It had its own traditions, practically its own language. The bars and recreation facilities were worn, well loved and out of fashion. There were no holodecks instead there were large gardens, shabby gymnasiums, and dark bars full of old memorbilia collected from every possible corner of the galaxy. Supposedly, sections of the station that went back to the days of the old Enterprise, or so it was rumored.

Admiral Connally looked positively flushed and this was out of character. His pale blue eyes snapped with glittering excitement in a normally somber face. He had a terrible scar that ran across his cheek that he kept for some personal reason. It gave him an especially dour expression.

His large square hands were in motion before he began speaking. His aging but formidible body heaved forward like a freighter underway. "This is a fantastic opprotunity," he began without preamble. He fixed his icy vision on Will. "Yes, we're offering you another captancy, Will. This time you'll take it."

"Sir, I'd like to be the judge of that," Will respectfully warned.

Connally waved his protest away. "You'll take it."

"Is that an order, sir?" Will asked. His face was expressionless, but Picard could read the stubborn rebellion.

"No," Connally answered bruskly. "It's a fact."

Picard interviened. "Can we ask what ship?" he asked sternly.

Connally fairly bounced with contained zeal. "Ah, but that's the wonder of it. It isn't one of ours at all."

"Not one of ours?" Riker exclaimed.

"No, Will. You're being offered the comand of a Klingon vessel! The Ka Pal."

"The Ka Pal? The flagship of the empire? Why? How?" Will inquired. He shared a look of stunned amazement with his captain.

"It's a joint venture worked out by Star Fleet and the Empire. One of their people has been offered the Columbia, and you're being offered the Ka Pal. In fact the Klingon's gave us only two choices, either you or Picard. They won't consider anyone else. The offer comes from Galron himself." He squared off against Will. "Well,

Comander what do you say?"

Riker stood his ground. "I say it's too big of a consideration to warrant an instant answer, sir. Give me some time."

"Four hours," Connally snapped. "And then we order Jean-Luc to take it. No offense but he is more valuble than you are, Will. We don't want to lose him, but if you don't take the Ka Pal, Picard must."

"I understand, sir," Will acknowledged stiffly.

Connally nodded tersly. "Keep this to yourselves, and I'll meet you aboard the Ka Pal. She'll be arriving anytime now. One of you will assume comand. The Enterprise will take the Klingon captain to rendezvous with the Columbia. I don't need to remind either of you of the historical signifigance of this event." The admiral intoned with weighty signifigance. "I know you'll make the right decision." He dispensed with the usual formalities and left the Captain's ready room to head back to the station.

Jean-Luc looked at his first officer. His face beaming with pride and enthusiasm. "A Klingon vessel!" he said in wonder. "The Admiral is right, this is a fantastic opprotunity."

Will didn't seem to share his enthusism. His eyes smoldered with unreadible emotion. "He's right about the rest of it too," he said calmly. "I can't refuse. They've offered me the one option I couldn't forsee, and can't turn down."

"Will, this is the chance of a life-time," Picard reminded.

Riker smiled sadly. "Yes it is." In that moment they both knew he would go. "If you don't mind, I'd like to spend a little time alone to think things through," he said.

"Of course. Take all the time you need," Picard offered expansively.

Will's expression was wry. "I've got four hours, Jean-Luc. I only want to spend a little time alone. The rest I want to spend with you."

Picard's face warmed with color. "I'll give you an hour," he said tenderly.

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"Wait, wait, wait," Q protested adamently. "Are you sure you're not influencing them?"

Bob stared with affront. "Would I cheat?"

"The question is, could you without me knowing it," Q stated. "The answer is, no. If I didn't know better, I would swear Jean-Luc is infatuated with his Neanderthal side-kick! What I don't see, is how this will lead to Picard leaving the Enterprise. You

should have offered the Klingon ship to Jean-Luc."

Bob's confidence was unwavering. "You're so impatient, Q! Wait and see."

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In the quarters he shared with the captain, Riker was going through a list of his belongings. He wondered if Jean-Luc would mind if he left some things. A trombone, for instance, would probably be inappropriate to bring aboard a Klingon bird of prey.

The door chimed. "Come," he greeted. He turned to see Deanna in the doorway. Her dark eyes were soft and luminous with emotion. He knew she had read his state of mind and come to him in his hour of need. Their empathic link was still strong. They remained good friends even after the surprise of his liaison with the captain. Riker knew Deanna and Worf had feelings for each other. He didn't think it would be long before the Klingon actually got up the courage to court her.

"Will?" she said melodiously. "What's wrong?" Looking down into the liquid depths of her brown eyes, Will thought of all the friends he'd be leaving behind. He saw that sadness reflected in her eyes; they widened and she said softly, "You're leaving."

"Yes," he admitted. "I've been given an opportunity I have to take."

"The Captain?" she asked. "How does he feel?"

Will sighed defeated by her empathic senses. "Worse than he lets on," he shared. "He acts as if this is the greatest thing that could happen, but I know there's more to it. I could feel there was something wrong. It was almost as if we were strangers suddenly," he confessed. "As if we'd never been together."

Deanna nodded sympathetically. "You think he was pulling away, trying to make the move easier on you."

"I know it. What else could it be?" He turned the trombone over in his hands and held it out. "Would you keep this for a while?" he requested.

Deanna smiled. "I'd be honored. Can you tell me where you're going?"

He shook his head. "Not just yet."

"I sense a lot of confusion, emotional turmoil. Are you sure you're alright?" She put her hand on his arm.

"No," he said honestly. "I'm not sure at all."

Deanna hugged him grateful that Will could not feel the strength of her emotions. She was sure, very sure, without needing a reason why, that this was all wrong

somehow. The feeling was sharp and quite insistent. "Then don't go," she said.

"You don't understand," he said. "I don't have a choice."

But instead of mollifying her premonition, his sad statement filled her with resolve.

"Deanna," Will said quite serious. "Don't let the other's know I'm leaving. I'm under orders not to say."

"How long will you be gone?" she asked.

His look was reproachful. "I think you know," was all he said.

"You're not coming back," she stated. Even saying the words brought a rush of premonition.

Slow and tender Riker leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "I'll be alright, Imzadi." He smiled and touched her hair. For a moment the old feeling between them flared again and he was lost in the sweet nostalgia.

"You only say that when I should be worried," she said. "Will, I don't like what I'm feeling."

"Deanna," he hushed her with a warm touch, "what you're picking up on is just my regret. I've loved my time here."

"You've found love," Deanna said tenderly.

Will laughed, his blue eyes glittering with pleasure. "Yes, and friendship and so much more."

"This isn't right," Deanna said slowly. Her eyes were dark as she searched her friend's face. "Something about this isn't right." She shook her head and backed away. "I'm sorry, Will," she apologized. "I can't accept this." She held up her hand to keep him from trying to stop her leaving.

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Deanna rushed down the corridor to the turbo lift. She took the lift to the bridge and headed right to the Captain's ready room. "Captain," she said, her distress evident. "Can I talk to you?"

"Of course, Counselor. What's wrong?" Picard said.

"It's about Will," she said in a rush. "Captain, you can't let him go!"

"Did Will tell you about his orders?" he inquired carefully.

Deanna straightened. "You know he would never do that, not if they were secret. I don't need to know the specifics to feel what I feel... from both of you. Will is leaving, and he's not coming back."

"Calm yourself, Counselor," Picard ordered. He was coldly calm, but concerned. It wasn't like Troy to react so strongly even on the behalf of someone she cared so deeply about.

"Don't deny it!" she scolded. "I sense danger. It's more than that. I have the strongest feeling that something is wrong, very wrong." Her agitation caused her to wring her hands and pace the room.

Picard sighed. "Counselor, I ask you to wait. I'm not dismissing your feelings. Riker faces a unique challenge. I know the circumstances behind the danger you sense. You have to trust me that I would never allow Will to come to any harm." He pressed the fingertips of his right hand against his forehead. "Not if I can help it," he finished faintly.

Deanna's concern doubled. "Captain, I sense your distress," Deanna insisted. "There's something very wrong at work here. The feeling is very strong."

"I respect your instincts and your gifts, Counselor, but I'm afraid we must proceed. The reason Will is leaving is that important."

"Important enough to risk his life?" she demanded.

Picard reacted with a heart-felt pain that only Deanna had the ability to sense. His face and manner were calm and sure. "Yes," he replied firmly. Their eyes locked with mutual discomfort and resolve.

"I can't accept that," she said.

Jean-Luc replied heavily. "I must." But it wasn't easy. Her warning alarmed him. He began to think less in terms of glorious opportunities and more along the lines of the kind of worry that plagued him whenever Will was on a dangerous away mission. For the first time he imagined what it would be like to feel like that all the time. Waiting alone anxiously wondering if Will would return. "Excuse me, Counselor," he apologized.

Of course Deanna sensed where he was going and didn't question. She only hoped she succeeded in communicating her feelings. She was fairly confident that he would act on her warning despite his apparent acquiescence. She could feel Jean-Luc's alarm and the passionate attachment he held for her former love.

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Picard paused before entering his quarters. He was prepared to be strong, sending Will on to his exciting, if dangerous, new life with courage. Deanna's warning had unnerved his resolve.

Will was packing a standard case. There was a single change of uniform, a jacket and a prudent supply of toiletry items. The rest of the case was crowded with personal mementos. Will looked up, smiled in greeting and straightened. Again Picard was impressed by his size and stature. The darkness of Will's hair and beard made the striking color of his eyes seem more vivid; they were cobalt and glittering now with a sheen of salty emotion. "Perfect timing," Riker said gratefully.

Everything he planned to say, all his encouragement and his strength of will faltered as he looked at that wry half-smile and those remarkable blue eyes. Words failed him. Will's expression changed, deepened and his arms rose slowly from his sides. Picard took three strides to cross the room and return that wordless embrace. He didn't know who was comforting whom, only that this would be their goodbye. The love he felt for Riker threatened to make him do foolish, wild things, like take his place. "Will..."

"No," Will said firmly. "Don't ask me to let you take my place."

"I was thinking more of ordering," he joked.

But Will's bearhug tightened. "A big part of me really wants to do this," he confessed. "Commanding a Klingon vessel on a permanent basis is a challenge I can't resist."

"Dangerous," Picard said tersely.

Will laughed. "Absolutely," he said, savoring the word.

"You'll be alone," Picard warned.

This time Will didn't look amused. He said very seriously, "Like Worf."

"I'd feel better if he were going with you," Picard admitted. He began to feel the emotion of loss roll over his insides like an oily wave. It made him feel like a child and he fought it.

"Are you offering him?" Again Will was serious. "I know it's not a question of whether or not he'll want to go. The hard part would be to hold him back."

"I know how that feels," Jean-Luc confessed painfully. "All my wise words about the two of us and our careers; standing here now it seems easy to throw all that away."

This startled Riker to obvious effect. He took a step back and frowned inquisitively. "Do you really feel like that?"

"Yes," he said forcefully. "Yes I do. Damn it! This whole situation feels wrong!"

"Saying goodbye is never going to feel right. How could it?" Will suggested. His

hands were shaking as he touched Jean-Luc's face. "You know I was more than half in love with you before we even met," he said. "I was in awe when we finally did. I must have come off like an idiot." His gentle eyes and disparaging smile were honest and charming.

Picard laughed. "Another big, square-jawed, brash commander," he remembered fondly. "You had the stance and size of a security officer. I would have thought you were arrogant if I didn't know your record. Everyone at Starfleet thought you were on the way to becoming the youngest captain in the history of the fleet. With such an impressive reputation I was prepared to be disappointed," he recounted acerbically. But his eyes and face shone with affection and pride as he said, "I never was. You have done nothing but continue to impress me with your abilities, your gifts, and your generosity of spirit. I can't think of anyone I have loved more truly, deeply and with less reserve."

Will could not reply for the longest moment. He closed his eyes and struggled for control. "Thank you, Jean-Luc," he said. "I didn't expect for us to become all that we have. I never expected to be your lover," he lingered over the statement as if the words were too foreign. "But I've never been more proud of anything in my life. If you asked me to," he said carefully, "I would resign my commission to stay by you. You do realize that's the only way we can ever be assured of remaining on the same ship."

"You know it would never work. It would be better if we both resigned and went off to live another kind of life," Picard surmised.

For a stunned moment the idea passed between them like a shared delicacy and then both of them shook their heads and softly laughed in denial.

They were standing close. Riker took Picard's face between his hands and kissed his lips tenderly, mindful of his beard. "Who knows when we'll be able to do this again," he said heavily.

"If we do, more than your beard will get in the way. Those Klingon uniforms are bound to present an imposition," Picard said with a smile. "You'll wear one most convincingly." He kissed the bearded lips and leaned into the muscular embrace. He liked both sensations. He savored the strange feeling that somehow all this was still new, still odd, even though they'd been lovers for so long. It was amazing how the novelty of their love could still seem so fresh even in these last hours.

"I just can't stand it!" announced a third voice in petulant frustration. Q materialized resplendent in a bright pink Starfleet uniform. He posed coquettishly in the center of the room.

"Q!" Picard greeted, with explosive irritation.

"In the flesh," Q agreed, "again."

Riker practically snarled. "What are you doing here?" He stood just behind Picard's shoulder and yet managed to look intimidatingly protective.

"And why that uniform?" Picard asked.

Q looked annoyed. "The inference is totally lost on you isn't it? Very well." He changed to a uniform that matched Riker's except for the captain's insignia. "I forgot that in this tolerant century you no longer understand the concept of stereotypes, let alone satire," he grumbled.

Enlightened and suspicious, Picard pointed a finger at their old advisory. "This has something to do with you, doesn't it?"

"You figured that out, eh?" Q said smugly. He turned to his left. "Told you they were clever."

Picard demanded, "Who are you talking to?"

Bob materialized looking svelte as well as indignant. Q bowed arrogantly and introduced her. "Mon Capitan, meet... oh I forgot, you've already met--"

"Bob," Picard finished.

"Bob?" Riker repeated, bemused.

Q frowned. "There's that damn echo," he said with annoyance. "Jean-Luc, you really should get that fixed." He raked his expressive eyes down Riker's torso.

Bob smiled benignly. "Enchanted I'm sure," she said sweetly sarcastic. Her silvery eyes lingered over them with a trace of irritation. She was obviously annoyed by something.

"Q, what's this all about?' Picard demanded.

Irrepressible, jovial and lethally impulsive, Q bounced on his toes with glee. "Do you see, Bob. Now do you understand? These people are absolutely maddening! Turn their lives upside-down and they learn to hang by their toes!"

"You revealed yourself too soon," Bob objected archly. "Everything was proceeding beautifully."

"Ha!" Q, snapped with contempt. "They would have gone their separate ways, nobly sacrificing their personal lives for their glorious Federation."

"I knew it!" Picard announced. "This situation with the Klingons is some set up of yours! Something about this whole thing felt wrong!"

Q grinned at Bob and snickered. "This is rather delightful in a twisted sort of way," he said.

Bob favored Q with a modest grin. "Should we tell them?"

Picard was ready to explode. "Q!" he warned.

Q ignored him. He saluted Bob. "Maybe you were right. Maybe there's hope yet." He turned to the livid Picard. "I'm sorry Mon Capitain. To set your mind at ease, yes,

this business of having Riker seconded to the Klingons is entirely my idea. A wonderful one by all accounts," he said proudly.

"We niether need, nor appreciate, your interference, Q!" Picard insisted. "Dealings between the Klingon Empire and the Federation are extremely sensitive right now. Any complication, or misunderstanding could lead to devastating consiquences."

"Well," said Q brightly, "We shouldn't keep Comander Riker waiting should we? After all he has a very important new job to hurry off to. And won't he make a superb Klingon? All that posturing and growling and manly fury. He'll be in his element!"

"With you involved, he'll be in danger!" Picard predicted. "It's not going to happen, Q. I won't stand for it."

"I'm sure the Klingons will be very understanding," Q returned sarcastically. "Tell me one thing, Jean-Luc. Do you really love this neanderthal?" He looked to Riker.

Sanguine with fury, Picard squared off against the omnipotent intruder. His gray eyes were dark with rage and courage. "Yes," he stated firmly. "And I warn you, if this plan of yours harms him in anyway I will find a way to make you pay."

"Fighting words!" Q crowed with delight. "Oh if only you knew!"

"Q!" Bob reminded warningly.

"That's right I did promise to give you more time. Very well then, adieu, Mon Capitan!" He grinned jauntily and popped out of the room with Bob.

"What in the hell was all that about?" Riker growled.

"It seems our old friend Q is up to his old tricks."

"This time he's dragged in the Klingon Empire," Riker said darkly. "This is not good. And who is that woman, another Q?"

"Apparently," Picard speculated. "I met her in the turbo lift desguised as a new ensign. I had no idea she was Q. There was a young man with her also dressed as an ensign. He must have been Q."

Will shook his head in dismay. "This changes everything and yet we're still in the same sitation. Q is right about one thing, we can hardly explain this to the Klingons. Nothing has changed. I still have to go."

"I cannot accept that as our only option!" Picard said.

Riker picked up his case. "Nothing has changed," he insisted resilutely. "Q may be playing games with us, but if it leads to something as momentus as an exchange of comands between the Federation and Empire, our personal lives will have to stand aside. You'd be the first to argue that if you were the one leaving."

"And you would be the first to try and make me stay," Picard reminded.

"That's my job," Riker answered.

Picard scowled darkly. "Have I ever told you how annoying your professency is in that regard?"

Riker laughed. "Often," he said fondly. "But I try not to let it affect me." His expression sobered. "I don't know if I like leaving that part of the job to someone else."

"There are parts of your service aboard this ship that your replacement will definitely not be taking over," Picard stated with a touch of ribald humor.

"Jean-Luc!" Will exclaimed as if scandalized. His brows arched and his handsome lips quirked.

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"Well? Now what?" Q inquired.

Bob swung her shapely legs beneath her as they sat on the edge of the port N-cell. "We give them time."

"Yes but not eternity. If Riker leaves. If they go their seperate tragic ways then you've failed to bring down Picard."

Bob protested. "He'll be miserable! Bereft of his love..."

"He'll get over it!" Q shouted.

"Alright," she conceeded. "I'll admit I failed if Picard doesn't leave in order to save Riker. You know it was actually a nice touch you revealing yourself to them when you did. It heightend their sense of danger. Picard feels protective now, worried about his lover."

Q preened. "Know thy subject, Bob my dear. And I know Picard so very well. At heart he's a space going fuedal lord, very patronising really, protective of his menials."

"So he may still sacrifice his precious career," she mused.

"I said protective not philathropic!" he sneered.

"Ah, look!" hailed Bob, distractingly. A Klingon bird of prey swung in from the deep void to cruise with graceful menace into docking orbit. "The Ka Pal, right on time."

"It's about time for the big send-off for our boy. Shall we go?"

Bob took his arm and they materialized in the transporter room. Invisable still to observe the spectacle.

Worf and Deanna stood shoulder to shoulder. Doctor Crusher was looking strained and a little teary eyed. Geordi stood with Data behind the console. Picard entered and behind him came Will in full Klingon uniform. He looked even taller and more impossing in the dark leather and exotic acutriments. He smiled when he saw his friend's reactions.

Doctor Crusher stood on tip toe to kiss his cheek. "So this is goodbye. I can't believe it. Take care, Will. Try and stay in contact."

He assured her he would. He faced Geordi and Data.

Data seemed puzzeled. "May I ask a personal question, sir?" Riker nodded assent. Data asked. "If Q is behind this, then it would seem... inadvisable to trust the situation as presented."

"Q or not, this opprotunity is something we can't afford to pass up," Riker answered. "And Data, I've reccomended that you be promoted to take my place."

Data seemed genuinely surprised. "Thank you sir. And good luck."

Geordi wished him luck, but it was with a heavy heart. "Watch your back," he said.

Deanna was holding Worf's arm. Her eyes were misty but defiant. Will stood in front of her and gently placed the fingertips of his right hand under her chin. "Imzadi..."

"Will, don't go," she begged. "I don't like this." Then she swallowed and closed her eyes. He kissed her forehead tenderly.

"Goodbye, Imzadi," he whispered. He turned away to let her say her fairwell's to Worf. He knew it would be hard to see them both go, but he was glad that his Klingon friend was going with him. There was only one more goodbye to say.

Picard looked into his eyes, took his hand and said in Klingon, "Serve with honor." It made Riker smile. As Worf stepped up on the transfer pad, Riker's grip strengthened with covert affection. Jean-Luc let go and reached up to cradle his lover's head. In an ancient tradition from his Gaelic heritage Picard kissed Riker on both cheeks with dignity and affection. Then he added a tradition of their own. For a moment the two men rested their foreheads against each other. "Take care, Will," Picard wished his friend and lover in a warm but unshaken voice.

"You too. Goodbye, Jean-Luc." Riker's voice was also steady but his eyes were locked on the storm-gray eyes of the man he loved. Slowly he stepped up on the platform and took one last look at his friends. He smiled his old poker smile and then schooled his expression to one of stern composure. "Energise," he ordered.

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The walk back to the bridge had never seemed longer. Picard went directly to his ready-room and sat heavily in his chair. Will was gone.

Q appeared in a flash of white light. "Bon Voyage!" he said gaily. "Maybe with those two gone things will liven up around here."

"I'm not in the mood, Q," Picard warned dourly.

"You never are. So I suppose you want me to bring him back?" he offered.

Picard glared. "No. I do not. Whatever your motives were this idea of an exchange of captains is a very good one. Will's a perfect choice. I confess I would feel better about it if you were not involved."

"Why? You said it was a good idea. You know I could earn real points with the Continuum on this," Q speculated, pleased with his ingenuity.

Picard tensed. "I believe that events are best left to their natural course. By speeding the process up as you have you may have damaged a balance of elements we can't percieve."

"Call it divine intervention," Q suggested.

Picard shot him a dark look. "You are hardly divine. I would prefer it if you stopped meddling in our affairs!"

Q grinned mischieviously. "Speaking of affairs. I'm not sure you really appreciate all I've done for you," he said happily. "It seems to me that my meddling, well Bob's actually, has actually done you some good. Things left to their own course would never have given you a lover like Will Riker."

"That's preposterous. You had nothing to do with our relationship," Picard protested. He was ardent and extremely uncomfortable, because he knew Q would simply delight in nettling him about Will. He tried to redirect the capricious entity. "Where is your friend by the way?"

Q smirked. "Paying off a bet," he informed. "She didn't think you'd let Riker go. She had this idea that rather than be parted from your one true love, you would both leave your precious careers." He eyed Picard with penitrating speculation. "I'll still give you that chance."

"No," Picard barked.

"But you do love him?" he queired.

Knowing Q would not be satisfied until he had what he wanted, Picard said it again. "Yes, I've already told you."

Still wheedling, Q pinned the furious human with his inquisitive eyes. "And you are convinced that this love is the result of natural occuring events and emotions?"

Picard frowned. "If you are trying to say that homosexual love is unnatural, our culture gave up that prejudice centuries ago. My love for Will is the result of mutual respect and--"

"Attraction?" Q inquired intensely. "Would you admit you're attracted to him physically attracted?"

Picard drew in a long breath. He tried to control his aggravation with this singularly annoying being. "I'll admit it, yes. Easily, happily," he all but shouted. "Now, will you leave me alone?"

Q positively gloated with pleasure. "Oh, this is too much to pass up. I have a splendid idea!"

"Q!" Picard bellowed, but it was too late. Suddenly he was standing in his quarters dressed for bed. He had a book in his hand, A Year In Provence. Everything was changed, yet nothing was. His quarters were still his quarters, but all of Will's things were gone. He remembered that Will had packed most of his things away, but not everything. It looked as if he never lived here. Picard wandered to the bedroom and looked at the bed. He remembered in vivid carnal detail their last night of passionate lovemaking, and yet the room and even the memory was different somehow. He tossed the book on the bedside table and went back to the main room. The door chimed. He said, "come," in a distracted voice. The door whisked back to reveal Will standing there in his Starfleet uniform, looking every bit as confused as he was.

Will took several steps then stopped. There was a moment's confused hesitation and then he scowled. "Q," he accused.

"Yes," Picard answered. An odd tightness wrapped around his belly and set his nerves on edge. As seconds tripped by, construction of reality asserted itself ruthlessly. The untampered reality where he and his first officer where no more than friends. He could see his reaction mirrored in Will's stunned expression changing rapidly from annoyed disorientation to embarrassed revelation. He could see Will's hands were fists slowly opening.

"Jean-Luc..." he said, "Captain."

It was like a knife twisting in his chest, that painful transition from his name to his rank. Jean-Luc hated the awkward feeling turning his blood to lead and his brain to cotton. He knew his emotions were playing over his features like banners waving in the breeze. He wanted to feel nothing but outrage at being so manipulated, but the sense of loss was so over powering that he felt drugged with it, with the loss came a stunning slam to the gut of shame. He could feel the bedroom at his back like a full-sized pornographic projection. Every private fantasy garishly revealed, every secret pain exposed. He could hardly make himself look at Riker let alone speak. "It never happened," his voice rasped.

Instead of grasping the life-line flung out for them, Riker reacted as if wounded. "Never happened?" he said slowly. He walked forward cautiously. "It did happen," he insisted. "Q manipulated us into thinking we were lovers, true, but we acted on that assumption. No outside compulsion moved me. I loved you," he swore. "I still do."

"No," Picard denied simply. "No, Will. What we shared was based on a lie."

Riker backed up a step. "Was it? Was it really? Or was it like the Klingon exchange of commands. Even when we knew it was Q who set it up, we decided to go through with it, because, " he emphasized his point forcefully, "it was a good idea!"

"But this is not a good idea. It never was. The two of us a couple? You know how Starfleet feels about a captain being involved with a member of his crew, especially a member of the bridge-crew. You're my second in command!" he blustered.

Riker's eyes snapped with blue fire. "Starfleet be damned! This has more to do with what I am than who I am. I'm a man and you can't handle your attraction. It must be wonderful to finally have a way out!" he thundered. "Well I can't just brush this off as one of Q's maniacal games. Who was it in that bed anyway? Was it you Jean-Luc? You didn't seem to find my touch repulsive. You didn't seem to question the two of us."

"But I did," he protested quietly. He saw pain settle over Riker's features like a veil.

With a breath, like his spirit, leaving him, Riker admitted. "That's right. You did." Shame replaced his outrage with a suddenness that made him quiver. "I apologize. I don't know what to say," he faltered and took refuge in a stiff military stance. "What do we do now?" he asked in his most professional voice.

Jean-Luc's heart hit bottom. He reached out. "I'm the one who's sorry," he said. "I hurt you and I didn't mean to. I don't want you to think that this... fantasy of Q's did not affect me. It did, profoundly," he assured. "But, Will. I don't want to be manipulated by a false sense of history. I'm afraid that what the two of us feel right now may be just the residual affect of that false time-line. In reality we had an affair."

Will smiled inquiringly over the word that in the other reality Picard had hated so intensely. "A one night stand?" He probed the limits of the captain's acceptance.

Picard blanched but nodded. "Yes," he said. "I don't deny that it was... really, quite, er, um."

"Fabulous?" Riker suggested, recovering his equilibrium with accustomed ease, now that he suspected his feelings were not misplaced.

Picard sighed. "It was what it was," he said uncomfortably. "But I need time. This is all very disturbing and I can't just accept a sexual relationship between the two of us like some sort of fancy wrapped present!"

There was a glimmer of bitter respect in Riker's eyes as he nodded brave acceptance. "Alright," he said, "but I can accept such a gift. I don't care who it comes

from." He smiled sadly. "If you want, we can pretend it never happened." Saying this he moved very close. His hand was confident as it touched Jean-Luc's jaw and slipped behind his neck. In the fading pattern of their false memory this was an old caress, but now it felt new.

Jean-Luc thought clearly as clearly as a red alert klaxon. //He is going to kiss me.// But he didn't pull away. The feel of the warm beard and the gentle lips was still as electric and as inviting as he remembered, but he would not give in to the pull of his own body. The kiss was brief.

Riker's eyes were sad and full of regret. He stepped back and assumed the stance and expression of an efficient first officer. "May I go, sir?" he asked as if they had just finished a briefing session. He stopped at the door. "Captain?"

"Yes?" Picard found his voice, but it didn't sound right somehow. Too bright, too desperately normal. That kiss was burning on his lips and running all through his body like a virus.

Riker posed to good affect and asked innocently. "What do I tell the crew?"

Well of course they would all know! Picard wanted to drop right out into the void leaving all memory that he'd ever lived behind him. Of course! How devious of Q, how perfectly horrid and typical! He would leave them the memory of that alternate reality to torment them and just to rub salt in the painful recollection he'd leave the senior staff with the memory too! Picard could only stand there mortified with embarrassment.

Riker, damn him, was smiling with ribald delight as he made his graceful exit.

ETIOLATE GODS

by

Taerie Bryant

Sam opened his eyes and sighed. He was alone, which was always the best way to leap in. He hoped he'd find the clues to tell him who he was supposed to be, or that Al would find him quickly and tell him what he needed to know, before he would have to react to other people and try to fumble his way through whoever's life he'd just assumed. He looked around. He was in a bedroom, and that made him apprehensive, wondering what situation he had leapt into. The room was bizarrely decorated. The walls were dark blue and lit with artfully angled floor and ceiling lights lending shades of lavender. There was a huge, pink neon circle on one wall and a collection of chrome masks on another. There were no windows. The bed was Oriental and the spread was black satin with a white heron embroidered in the center. There were three doors, presumably to a closet, a bathroom and one leading where? A hotel hallway? A home?

He cautiously tried one of the doors. Before he could open it, a voice came from inside. "Where are we? A cave?" Sam jerked the door open to find Al standing in a huge closet.

"Quit fooling around!" he admonished his favorite hologram.

Al stared at him without replying. His cigar drooped from parted lips and his eyes were round with startled surprise. "Sweet Jesu..." he mumbled and backed up a step.

"What?" Sam looked down at his clothing. He found simple dark gray slacks, matching leather espadrilles and a white shirt with a simple pink and gray tie. "What?" he asked again when the startled Al seemed unable to reply. Sam looked at the closet door, but there was no mirror. He went to one of the other three doors and tried it with equal caution. The bathroom was elaborate. The tiles were white with a checkered border of black. The fixtures were also black. The mirror was huge and the lighting was stark.

"Oh boy..." Sam breathed in startled disbelief. He had never seen anything or anyone like the man he saw in the mirror. He peered closer, ever fascinated. The image only became more fantastic. Standing before him was an albino.

"You said it," Al agreed in hushed tones. He came in and stared at the mirror image. "I didn't get a chance to see the guy in the waiting room. Sorry, Sam. You, I mean he, really took me by surprise."

Still Sam stared. He had seen albinos before but never like the one he saw now. Whoever he was, he was beautiful in a strange exotic way. His skin, even under the harsh revealing light, was without flaw, white as China, stretched over a fine bone structure and handsome features. The blue veins beneath his eyelids gave his eyes a natural shadow. The eyes were true red, a deep, uncompromising crimson framed by dark gray lashes and white brows. There was a thin line of palest blue around the red irises.

His silver hair was tied back in a braid. Sam pulled it over his shoulder, slowly untied the black cord on the end and began to unplait it. The mirror image showed a thick mane of coarse shining hair that reached to his waist.

"The last time I saw hair like that was Roy Roger's horse Trigger," Al observed. "You look really weird, Sam." Al cocked his head. "Good, but weird...."

"Yeah...," Sam agreed. "Who is this guy, Al?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Al answered absently. At Sam's aggrieved look his attention snapped back to business and he pulled out the handlink.

"Your name was Sigurd Volscian but now you go by Sterling Wolfe. You are somewhere in your late twenties or early thirties. There are no clear records of your date of birth. You make your living by," Al looked up his eyes wide, "modeling," he said with a bright snap.

Suspicious of his friend's less than artful dodge, Sam prodded for the truth. "Come on, Al. Modeling what?"

"Not a whole hell of a lot," Al confided with a stunned expression. "It's the eighties, Sam. The height of modern sensual decadence. Photographers like Maplethorp are busy changing the way we look at sexual imagery. Worhol's Velvet Underground spawns a whole bunch of these artists," he explained with in a rush.

Sam backed up a step. "These artists? What are you saying? I'm some kind of life model, like for paintings and sculpture?"

"Well... No. You're an exotic model for um... well these exclusive and really spendy photo shoots."

"You're not telling me something, Al," Sam accused.

Sheepish, but hiding a wicked grin, Al said quickly, "You, I mean Sterling, specializes in homoerotic poses, bondage and stuff like that. He's famous all over Europe for some really hard core stuff, very..." Al turned the handlink and cocked his head as if studying a confusing picture. His eyes were again wide with amazement. "Very weird," he finished with a gasp.

"Wonderful," Sam sighed. "Does Ziggy have any idea what I'm here to do?"

"We're working on it, Sam. All we know is that Sigurd appears in some notorious photographs in the mid-eighties, then he just disappeared mysteriously along with his sister."

The unopened door to the outside opened with a snap of the hotel card-key and a shove. "God damn it, Sigurd! Why didn't you meet me in the lobby? Did you just drag your ass out of bed?"

Sam and Al stood with mouths slightly agape as the stranger barged her way into the room. She dragged frosted nails through liquid, jet-black hair with an infuriated motion and snatched off her dark glasses. She was willowy and tall with milk-white skin and sky-pale irises rimmed with the cherry hue of an albino. Her lips were painted dark red, glossy as a waxed apple. "What?" she demanded.

"Her name is Scylla. She's your sister," Al supplied quickly.

Sam whispered harshly, "Scylla and Charybdis the monsters of the Straits of Messina."

She heard him. "That's supposed to mean hello? All this expressionism is poisoning your sense of humor, brother."

"I'm sorry," Sam stammered. "You startled me."

Her eyes focused sharply on his expression. She took several long strides to confront him. "Something is wrong," she deduced. Her strange eyes searched his face. "You haven't done something stupid have you?"

"I don't think so," he faltered.

"Well you look guilty as sin." She didn't take her eyes off his. Finally he looked away, seeing in his peripheral vision her slight smile of satisfaction. He thought of wolves establishing dominance. The thought made him shiver.

Suddenly she was all warmth and casualness where before she'd radiated a fierce sharpness both in voice and manner. "Have you gone out much?" she asked, propping the door open to retrieve one of her bags.

Sam went with her as if drawn by an invisible cord. He picked up the heavier of the two bags and set it on the bed. "No," he answered, hoping it was the truth.

She flung her glossy hair over her shoulder and smiled. "Good," she said again satisfied. "Come. Sit," she commanded patting the bed.

He sat beside her tentatively.

With firm but gentle hands she pulled his long hair back and began to run a brush through the silky strands. The sensuous familiarity of her touch made his skin quiver and his scalp tingle with an unfamiliar pleasure. Sam closed his eyes as the touch of her fingertips and the weird but lovely sensation of the brush wove a spell of tingles along his nerves.

"I'll just pop off to see what Ziggy can come up with," Al excused himself, but he didn't make use of the door for long moments, watching the strange pair on the bed and worrying about the rapt expression on his friend's face. "She's his sister," he wanted to remind his friend. But the taboo never reached his lips.

Sam roused himself with the rush of deep sexual longing. His whole body was flush with heat and tingling. Her smoky scent seemed to grow more powerful, filling his senses with the smell of incense and musk. His breath was shaky. He wanted to summon the will to stand, but she pressed his shoulder with her slim hard hand to be still.

"Hush," she whispered. She began to braid his hair, murmuring in a language that his mind could barely follow. German, he thought but an ancient dialect. The hair on the back of his neck stirred. He reminded himself that she was supposed to be his sister. He didn't dare stand, he didn't dare turn around. He couldn't hide his arousal. He concentrated on the interesting fact that the sensation of having his hair brushed and braided was real to him, as if it were his own, and she seemed completely unaware that there was nothing in her hands but woven air.

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In the waiting room, Al confronted the real Sigurd. He sat quietly on the floor with his arms around his knees. The white body-suit made him look like a statue of alabaster. His red eyes were more surreal in the unforgiving light. His expression was the calm of a caged wolf, patiently waiting for the moment to spring. He regarded Al with casual interest and did not bother to stand.

"Do you understand what I've said?" Al asked. He was surprised by the rich baritone voice of the albino, with its lush European accent.

"Yes. Your friend is living my life for the moment. I am here living his." He gestured languidly to his face. "I look like him, sound like him, but he was not a prisoner." His strange eyes gently accused.

"You look like yourself to me," Al said.

"And why is that?" Sigurd asked.

Discomforted, Al shrugged. "I don't know. I've never known. We can't explain it, but I can see Sam as himself now and at first I could only see a sort of aura that was him around whoever he looked like." He broke off. "It's very complicated."

The albino smiled. "I understand complications and things that defy explanation." He brightened falsely and said, "So tell me how my life, as your friend is living it, goes."

"Your sister is with Sam now," Al answered and watched closely for Sigurd's reaction.

The smile and the false lightness dissolved. "Then your friend is in very great danger."

"Danger, why?" Al asked sharply.

Sigurd looked bleak. "My sister is a dangerous woman. If she discovers that your friend is not who she thinks he is, she will feel betrayed. Scylla is... predictable in some things. She doesn't like to play the fool."

"When I left them I got the impression that you and your sister are close." Al said less than he implied, but his face and expressive brows insinuated plainly what he meant.

Sigurd smiled thinly and his voice was cold. "There are not words to describe what we are. Your friend would be best served by avoiding Scylla at all costs, but that of course is impossible." The last words were bitter.

"I get the impression you would if you could," Al said uneasily.

Sigurd looked haunted. "There is nothing I would not give to be free of her."

Al suppressed the desire to race from the room back to Sam. The albino made him feel as if someone had just stomped madly on his grave. "Tell me why," he insisted.

"Never," Sigurd replied softly. He rested his forehead on his knees and refused to say anything more.

Al went back into the control room and consulted with Ziggy, trying to find information on the siblings. He found out that they were orphans, that Scylla was older than Sigurd and functioned as his manager. Her life was one of deep shadows, moving among the jet-set, the rich and indolent all of her life. There were no formal schools in their records, no adoption papers, only vague and disturbing references by a child welfare worker in Rumania that Scylla had been "a child bride" to a wealthy man who had died. Her age at the time was listed as nine. Accusations followed both children. They had never been separated, and Ziggy was able to compile the international bits and pieces into a life history that chilled those that heard it. Scylla had been implicated in everything from murder to minor drug trafficking from the time she was twelve. A high class prostitute and famous model for a brief time, she seemed to flirt with the dregs of the criminal underworld while residing among the wealthiest of elite society. She traded on her own mystery, her exotic beauty and eventually on those same qualities in her brother, prostituting what she had fostered at such great expense as a child. It appeared she had protected Sigurd to the best of her ability while they grew up, but something somewhere had changed all that, twisted their relationship. Recent accounts painted a picture of bizarre celebrity status, Sigurd outshone his sister as a lighting rod for the jaded aristocracy.

Al rubbed his forehead. "This is sick," he mumbled.

"I agree," replied Ziggy in tones of extreme outrage. "We must get Doctor Beckett

out of there at once!"

"How?" Al replied.

"I show a 98 percent probability that Doctor Beckett is there to prevent Sigurd from saving the life of his sister."

"Huh?"

"Two days from now Scylla will be rushed to Miami General for treatment. She is almost strangled, but her brother saves her. Her assailant is never found but speculation was that it was Sigurd.

"But he couldn't go through with it. If that's the case then Sam would have to... He'd never do it."

"In the next month Scylla signs a contract forcing her brother to make the French film, La Guerre, after which he disappears. It is rumored he was killed during the filming."

"La Guerre," Al mused. "That means war. What was it, an action movie?"

"Depends on what you call action," Ziggy replied tartly. "There are no accessible prints of this film. All prints were snatched up by private collectors. It is said to be the definitive statement of sado-masochism as erotic art."

"Yech!" Al exclaimed. "That witch. I wonder what she has over her brother that would make him agree to something like that?"

"A lifetime," Ziggy supplied smugly. "If you studied humans objectively you would come to the same conclusion."

Al returned to the imaging chamber to reunite with Sam. He found him at a swanky art gallery in the middle of a glittering party. He could tell by the expression on Sam's face that he was both relieved to see him and aggravated by the length of his absence.

Sam excused himself to the bathroom. It was full of men snorting cocaine so he hunted out a quiet spot in one of the lesser exhibits. "What did you find out?" he asked impatiently.

Al noticed that Sam seemed to be suffering from a prolonged blush and guessed that life as an exotic piece of human art did not agree with his bucolic upbringing. "Nothing good. A word of advice. If for some reason you should find Scylla wearing a collar three sizes too small, make yourself scarce."

"What?"

"Or if you should be inspired to just reach out and choke her." Al gave a spirited demonstration.

"Will you be serious? So far I don't have a clue as to why I'm here. I spent all of last night reading Sigurd's diary and, let me tell you, I couldn't eat breakfast..."

"Yeah, well his sister's life would make a Sumo wrestler bolimic," Al said sharply. Sam turned away, discomforted, and Al moved around his shoulder to peer inquiringly into his friend's face. "What's going on Sam? Something happen between you and Vampirella you want to tell me about?"

Sam stammered a little and his cheeks were flushed, but his eyes had a familiar spark of indignation. "Al, Scylla is--"

"Not your sister, Sam."

"Yeah, well she's Sigurd's. And as far as she knows I'm him."

Al arched one eyebrow and said provocatively, "Sisterly love. Sure, Sam. And I'm a monk."

Sam straightened. "She flirts, but she expects me to know it's a game. I'm her brother, Al!"

"Are you sure she's just playing?"

Sam nodded. "It's in his diary." He didn't look happy as he confided the dirty secrets his reading had uncovered. "Scylla's twisted. No argument. She enjoys taunting him. She's got this hold over him. He's afraid to write it down, but there's something in their past that binds them together. Sigurd calls it, The Dark. His writing is full of references to it. Whatever it is it binds the two of them together." Sam paced the artfully lit gallery gesticulating as he talked. "It's poisoned Sigurd with guilt. It must be something really awful. It's clear that he'd love to be free of his sister. He's terrified of her, he hates her, but he loves her."

"Well the bond between siblings is strong," Al offered.

"Not like this. This is... scary." Sam looked up. His eyes had the exact haunted expression that Sigurd's had in the waiting room. "It's powerful, Al. I feel it, part of it anyway, and I'm not him."

"Be glad," Al said fervently. He thought of Sigurd's strange eyes and that defeated posture. It reminded him of prison camp and the ones that gave up. "Sam, Ziggy thinks that you're here to make sure Sigurd's sister buys the farm before she can get him to sign a contract that locks him into making some terrible porn flick. Well... not exactly terrible. A really swanky porn flick. You know one of those French flicks, with all those purring accents and silky--"

"Al!" Sam interrupted. "I can't believe I'm here to kill Sigurd's sister! Whatever you think of her, she raised them both the only way she could, using the only thing she had. And in her own way she protected her brother. You don't understand the way they had to live!"

"No, Sam. You don't understand. I was an orphan. You were raised on a farm by people who loved you! Believe me I'm not judging her."

This quieted Sam. He nodded. "I'm sorry, Al," he apologized. "Maybe I'm here to

make sure that Sigurd doesn't make the film. Maybe I'm here to help him break free of his sister's hold over him. I think the way she survived her childhood damaged her, twisted her way down deep, but by shielding her brother she allowed him to grow up differently, better, cleaner. She resents it now. I think she uses guilt to control him."

"Maybe," Al went along. "But like I said the bond between siblings is strong. She may never let him go."

Sam shivered. "I'm not sure death would change that."

Al was startled and didn't try to hide it. "You might be right. In the original history Scylla almost dies of strangulation. Her brother saves her by taking her to the hospital. Sigurd is the main suspect, but Scylla never accuses him. My guess is she drove him to it. Anyway, about a month later she gets him hooked into that movie deal, afterwards they both disappear."

Sam smiled. "That's what Sigurd wants."

"Suicide?" Al exclaimed.

"No. To disappear, get away, far away. He dreams of living in a remote place far from staring eyes and groping hands. He has a fantasy of taking Scylla to Alaska."

"Yeah, I can really picture Ms. Tigerclaws living on the tundra. Fantasy is right," Al scoffed.

Sam agreed. "He knows she'd never go. She wouldn't be happy there. Her dream was always to be rich and powerful. Sigurd writes that his sister used to promise him that when they were rich they wouldn't have to depend on anyone, or do things they didn't want to."

"Considering what she was doing, that must have seemed like paradise."

"She was just a little girl, Al. Wealthy old men used to dress her up like an Egyptian goddess and do..." Sam broke off, sickened and enraged. "They made her the center of a cult, messing with her mind, and subjecting her to ritual perversions. I think to some degree she still believes that she and her brother aren't really human." Sam resumed his frenzied pacing. "The same sick rational used to elevate and degrade her, she uses to defend herself. She thinks she's special, above morality or beyond it. I don't know, but that's how she explained dragging Sigurd into this debauched existence."

"Sam," Al called his attention quietly. "One way or another, she prostituted her own brother. However she shielded him as a kid, eventually she convinced herself that it was alright. I think you can explain it, but don't defend it."

Sam stopped in the middle of the room. "Al I know what she did. I don't think you realize the extent of it. It isn't just a matter of the kinky photos, or this movie deal. She brought her brother into the circle of that cult. She prostituted him for real, trading his body for hers. And she's still doing it."

Al's mouth hung open. "Oh, that's sick. That's really sick. No wonder he strangled

her."

"We don't know that he did," Sam reminded.

"Maybe he should!"

"You don't mean that!" Sam snapped angrily. His hands were fists.

A strange voice floated into the room. "Meant what?" Scylla, much like her voice, gracefully rounded the corner. Her hair that Sam knew now was dyed, was coiled up on her head in a multitude of braids, Grecian, suggesting ancient statues of old Gods. She wore a tight, off the shoulder blue dress, it made her albino skin look dead. Her eyes were falsely blue, the benefit of contact lenses. There were more expensive, less theatrical lenses, but she seemed to wear these for their effect. "I've told you a thousand times, not to slip away like this. This is not Paris, not even New York. People are less sophisticated, more provincial."

"Meaning?" Sam asked uneasy.

She smiled thinly. "They hunger for transcendency. And so they blunder after vulgar pursuits like trendy drugs, bad art, and bizarre sex, in the mistaken notion that expensive sensation and notoriety will raise them above their class." She trailed her painted nails over a muted watercolor, making a faint, chilling scrape of sound. "When they look at you, they see something unattainable, desirable, too strange to be inexpensive. A devil, an angel, or..." She tilted her head and spread her hands. "Being as this is Miami, we are the ultimate in pastel." Her lips twisted with bitter humor.

Sam smiled easily back. "You play it up for all it's worth. It's only the pigment of our skin, or lack there of. There's nothing mysterious about that."

Her face hardened. "Are you sure?" she purred. "Haven't you felt it? The way they stare. The hunger. They know even if we have doubts. They know we are something more."

Sam sighed. He shook his head and stepped forward to put his hands on her shoulders. "We're just different. It's natural for people to stare, to speculate. We're lucky, most albinos don't have our... looks."

She hissed like a cat and flung his hands off. "You know I hate that word!" she snarled. "Is it lucky to be born not just an outcast, but a gorgeous one? What luck can come from being shunned and wanted at the same time?" Her cobalt eyes narrowed. "We are unnatural," she seemed to be quoting with a sneer. "So it's only right that we be the focus for the unnatural," she hissed the last word as if it were poison. "Unnatural passions," she whispered in an oddly powerful but choked voice. "Or do you call what was done to you only natural, like their stares? Tell me little brother, did you secretly enjoy it?" Her smile was wicked and meant to wound.

He snapped at her, "Stop it." The memory of what he'd read sifted through his mind, ashes and oil, filth and degradation. He wanted to strike her. "Alienating ourselves from everyone else isn't going to solve anything," he said with firm conviction. "Why do you want to feel so much hate? Why do you want to make me feel it? Can't we put the past behind us?"

"Never!" she swore. "I can't forget. You can't either."

"But we can go on," Sam insisted. "Acknowledge the past, kiss it goodbye and go on. People reinvent themselves all the time. We're adults. We can start over." He reached out to hold her, but she went stiff in his arms.

Scylla's eyes flicked around the room like a cornered animal. Tears threatened at the corner of her eyes and her carefully painted lips quivered. She barred her teeth. "Traitor!" she snarled. "You want to leave. That's it, isn't it. You're a man. You can leave, go anywhere you like. But me, you know what will happen to me. After all I've done for you. You're going to reinvent yourself? See how far you get, brother!" Her hands dug into his arms and her voice rumbled with rage. "You swore," she said suddenly in a strange voice. "You swore."

He had no idea what she was talking about, but something made him feel a knot of ice form in his guts. Her words hinted at the secret that Sigurd called The Dark. There was something terrible in those words. She meant them to evoke some awful memory. A memory that chained Sigurd, but he didn't have. "I won't leave you," Sam said into that terrible stare. "I would never do that. Even if I did, it wouldn't mean that you'd have to become some kind of prostitute."

She shoved him with a strength that was startling. The glass on the picture on the wall behind his back cracked with the impact. Her eyes were wild, and her braids lost their perfect coil and straggled across her cheek. If he had stabbed her in the heart Sam didn't think her face could hold a more pained expression. Her body was ridged, every sinew standing out from her bones as if under a horrible strain. All at once she raised her head and the cords in her throat quivered with the strain of a long anguished howl.

"God Almighty!" Al gasped.

Sam's gut wrenched with the horrible sound and the strangest desire to join her. He could feel the cry pulled up from his gut with a wrenching sensation as if he would vomit sound. The sound of dozens of feet pounding down the hallway accompanied by startled voices jolted him out of the feeling. He staggered forward and wrapped her in his arms. "Come on," he urged her. "Come on." He forced her through the hallway and the crowd of well-dressed people. She was breathing harshly like an asthmatic. He shouldered his way to the exit and motioned for their alert driver.

In the dark, plush interior of the Limo the whiteness of her face seemed to be lit from within, her pale eyes stared free of their fake lenses, outlined by streaks of wet makeup. It was an impossible face framed in dark coils, polished to a bone-white sheen. She looked as if any moment she would simply shatter from the force of emotion clenched within. Sam was afraid to touch her.

Al remained behind, blending in with the clashing pastel neon of the trendy gallery's entrance. His face was creased into an expression of sympathetic shock. "You watch out for her, Sam," he warned. "I'm going to have a chat with her brother."

The car started smoothly away from the curb. The flicker of intruding light slipped over her ridged features with flickers of blue and white like lightning. Sam could see

the glittering trail of tears spill from her eyes. She made no effort to hide them. Her face never moved. It was like watching an alabaster lamp shed tears.

"Does it have to be so hard?" he asked softly.

She turned, her back stiff and her shoulders still squared like an empress on the throne. "If you leave me I won't die," she said in a husky voice. "You will always know I'm living somewhere. It will be like an itch you can't scratch. A wound you can't mend."

There was something awfully chilling in this. He cleared his throat. "Why would that hurt me? You think I'd rather have you dead?"

Her pale eyes widened. "Without you I'd suffer. Would you rather have that? I'd rather know you were dead, than leave you to suffer. I'm strong enough to do that for you. I always thought you were strong enough to do it for me."

"Do what?" he asked.

Her red lips quivered. "Kill me," she whispered almost pleading. Her hands were cold when they grabbed his and squeezed. "Rather than see me suffer. As my brother, as the only one I've ever loved, ever trusted. If you're going to leave, kill me first."

Sam tore his hands free. "You're insane," he gasped. His heart was pounding and he couldn't get his breath. He fumbled for the controls to the window when a sudden gust of air hit him from her side of the car. He grabbed her arm and pulled her body against him. The big car swerved as the driver reacted to the open rear door. Sam reached across her to grab the heavy door. It took all his strength to slam it shut. The wail of horns from surrounding cars was abruptly muffled. He was panting as he flung himself back against the seat and answered the driver's concerned question. "No," he answered when asked if they should pull over. "Take us home."

Now her hair was tangled around her face like Medusa's serpents. Her wild eyes, were like a Siamese cat's. The milky-blue irises swallowed by the garnet colored pupils, like twin wounds opening to the heart. "You've left me already!" she accused. "You're like a ghost holding me. A stranger!" She searched his face. "What's changed you, Sigurd?"

He would not let go of her arm. But he wanted to draw away from her piercing stare. "Stop trying to manipulate me!" he demanded. The force of his aggravation was like a slap. "I said I wasn't going to leave you. I meant it. Stop these insane histrionics and trust me." Inspiration fired his mind and Sam went suddenly cold. "It isn't a matter of trusting me is it, Scylla?"

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Only if I'm an extension of yourself can you trust me. That's why any move I make to control my own life threatens you so much. Anything I do to be something other than what you want scares the hell out of you. You can't trust me. You only trust yourself and that part of you in me." She was pulling away from him. Visibly shaken. He entreated her, "Scylla, we can't be a race of two. We can't shut out the world,

hating everyone who isn't just like us. Can't you see that makes us no different than the people you despise?"

"You think we're like them?" she hissed. "With their filthy minds and their groping hands? We are nothing like them. They want to stare at us because we're not. They want to touch us because we're not."

"They're not all like that," he insisted gently.

"Even if we looked like them," she said, pulling at her hair. "We could you know. But even if we dye our hair, our skin, our eyes, our past would separate us irrevocably from them! And you know that!" Her nails were like claws digging into his forearms. Her eyes bored into him, seeking some essential tie.

Sam had to break that stare. He looked down. He nodded without understanding what he was agreeing to. There was something more terrible in her voice than the degradation Sigurd's diary portrayed. It was the dark thing he would not even write about in privacy. Sigurd recorded so many awful atrocities faithfully in unflinching detail, but there was this one thing, The Dark, that remained unexamined and eternally captivating. This horror was in Scylla's pale eyes. This awful secret. Sam knew it was the thing that anchored the siblings not just to each other, but to an evil destiny. He knew the tortured boy in Sigurd's journal did not deserve this continuing nightmare, but he was not so certain about his sister. Scylla was a creature of horrific forces. There was a maelstrom of chaos where her soul should be. Sam could ache for the child she must have been, but the resulting woman repulsed him. The energy radiating from her was decidedly manic.

Warm lips pressed wetly against his mouth. Hard wiry hands gripped the back of his neck holding him like a vice. A tangle of icy limbs clung to him with fevered intensity.

"Stop!" he pulled his face to the side, twisting away without forcefully shoving her across the car. "What do you want from me?" he cried.

"Don't shut me out!" she pleaded. "I just want to know we're still part of each other. Once we were halves of the same heart, pumping one blood, living one life. You swore that would never change!"

Compassion for her, even in her madness, moved in him. The words in Sigurd's diary had hollowed out a place for her in his heart. "We were children. You can't hold me to vows we made as orphans." Her face could get no paler, but her eyes went dead. Sam reached for her. "I love you," he said into that dead space. "I'll always love you," he assured. "But as a sister. Why isn't that enough?"

Her eyes closed. "For us it means more."

"What means more?" he asked with trepidation, recoiling.

The icy blue in her eyes glinted with a brittle penetrating quality. The red pupils were dilated, their wine color enhanced by the flickering beams of passing cars. She licked her red painted lips. "Blood ties," she intoned. She dared him with her expression to defy her further.

The Dark, he thought. The unspeakable thing. He had to have Al find out what it was. Sigurd may have been held captive by this secret, but Sam wasn't. He didn't have the lifetime of living with whatever it was to cripple him. "That's not going to work forever, Scylla," he warned as gently as he could. "I won't be ruled by fear." He meant it. He'd run across too many bullies not to know the hint of blackmail in her dulcet tones.

She looked puzzled, a little lost. Her smooth brow furrowed. "Sigurd, you promised to protect me. You took the role of idol from me because being a boy made you stronger. You were twelve, but you made me believe it. In their own way people worship you. I am your grand priestess, they must go through me to do it. It's a better life than we've ever had." The last words were an entreaty. "I'm frightened that we could lose it."

"You're my manager, not a priestess. And I do want to protect you, but that doesn't mean I'll be your puppet."

"This photographer," she said urgently. "This photo shoot tomorrow, could be the start of a new life for us. He isn't like the others. He's brilliant. I just want to be sure that when he makes you a star that there's a place in the firmament for me."

Although alarmed at the mention of the photo shoot, Sam kept it from his face. He smiled. "Of course," he assured her. Sigurd's last entry in his journal railed with dread at the reasons that motivated Scylla to drag them from Paris to New York and then Miami all for this one photo session. He was afraid. The emotions were so intense that Sam had forgotten it had nothing to do with him, but the shoot Sigurd dreaded was tomorrow and it was Sam who would have to "do the despicable," as Sigurd put it. This from a man who'd spent his childhood as a sex object for despotic aristocracy.

The hotel was a pink edifice of Caribbean elegance, ultra modern, but classic and quiet. The hand-painted tiles and the use of expensive hardwoods and playful fountains formed a sheltering welcome in the lobby and inner court. Sam kept his arm around Scylla all the way from the entrance to the elevator. Wide stares followed them as if they were dressed in fantastic costumes meant to be goggled and commented on. It annoyed him suddenly and he avoided the curious eyes, sheltering Scylla with a sudden fierceness.

The pastel peach and cream hall was silent as they made their way to the penthouse suite. The room was enhanced by arrangements of fresh Calla Lilies, white and smooth, proudly gleaming in crystal vases. Sam poured them both a drink from the thick crystal decanters arranged on the mini bar. He had no idea what he was serving, only that it was amber colored and smelled like fire.

Scylla sat on one of the dark blue wing-backed chairs. It seemed to swallow her whole. She looked strained and vulnerable as she took the glass. "I don't want to talk," she said resolute. Her eyes were red-rimmed and miserable.

"Alright," Sam agreed. He took his drink to the balcony and sipped it as he stared out at the ocean and the lights playing out across the water. He didn't care for alcohol, but his frayed nerves seemed grateful to huddle around the liquid warmth. Cool hands slipped over his collar bones and down his shoulders. Scylla pressed her

body against his back, fitting her hips against his rear. "Scylla..."

"Hush," she whispered. "Look out at the night. The lights and the water." She moved her hands, wrapping them around his chest, sealing them together firmly. He shifted to turn around but she prevented him gently. "No," she said. "Be still." She rested her cheek against his back and sighed. "I want to feel your strength, that's all. Let me cling to you a little while."

She was warm, quivering slightly like a taught wire. Sam knew she could hear his quickened heartbeat and the shallow drag of his breath. He forced himself to relax. He closed his eyes and thought of other things. He pictured fields covered with smooth folds of snow, white like her skin... He could feel her relax and go soft. He turned and folded her yielding body in his arms and kissed the top of her head. The tension and the madness flowed from her like tears. He smoothed her tangled hair. The feeling of the many braids and the layers of lacquer made it feel more like wire. He reflected as he held her that Sigurd was the only real love and security she'd ever known. All her strength, all her needs were too narrowly focused and distilled, until, for her, their union was the only one she had any faith in. In it's insane intensity, Scylla's obsession was repulsive, but in this tender desperation it moved him to pity. What else did she have? How could he judge?

He led her to the bedroom and put her to bed like an unprotesting child. She smiled wearily as he tucked her in. The good night kiss she insisted on was disturbingly passionate, but he allowed it and returned it with a rather enlightened insight into her fragile psyche. She seemed content and let him leave in peace.

Sam went out to the balcony and called with whispered urgency for Al, but there was no reply.

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The morning started with a discreet knock on the door. Breakfast. Scylla came sailing from the bedroom in a black lacy negligee that made the waiter blush and stare. Her hair was wrapped in one of the hotel's thick white towels and her face, devoid of makeup, had a startling sheerness. It was as if the veins in her eyelids gave them a slight shadow. Pink light shone ever so slightly through her thin nostrils and delicate ears. Even her silvery lashes had a strange luminous quality. Sam came face to face with the real Scylla, unadorned and far more beautiful than the painted extravagance he'd confronted the night before. She took off the towel with dramatic roughness. Her hair was white. Her pink scalp looked scrubbed raw. "Well?" she asked. Palest-blue eyes sparkled and glinted bright cherry red.

"Much better," he answered truthfully.

She laughed. "The maid's going to scream when she sees the mess I've made. I left you one clean towel, the rest are all stained black. But if you're going to use it, you'd better hurry. We're supposed to meet Gordon in an hour."

"Gordon?"

She tossed an orange forcefully. He caught it with ease. "The photographer, bunnybrain."

He tossed the fruit back, then stumbled off in the direction of the bedroom from where she'd emerged. On impulse he picked up Sigurd's valise and took out the diary. The entry it opened up on was one of the latest. It read: "Why does my misery make her so happy? How much happiness can I afford? Sometimes, when she is most happy, I wish her dead. In the brilliance of her smile, the bright peal of her laughter I want to wrap my hands around her throat. In my dreams, she lays dead beside me in a coffin lined with flowers. My secret in the dream is my happiness to wake alive. Does this mean death will free me? Her death, or the death of what we were? I take this dream to mean that she remains in this living death, but I am alive. I am waking. I am leaving the sweet coffin."

Sam read this and shivered. Sigurd's writing affected him strongly. The journal of his bizarre and turbulent life was hard to put down, but he had to. He showered and wrapped the last clean towel around him. He was not surprised to find Al waiting for him in a cloud of steam.

"Gee, Sam. You're lookin kinda pale," Al observed wryly.

"Very funny," Sam answered. "You have anything for me?"

"Nada, zip, but Sigurd is a real interesting guy. He's positive that you're in mortal danger from his sister. He doesn't seem worried about her at all." The smoke from Al's cigar mingled with the steam as he followed Sam into the bedroom. "I get the impression he'd be happy to live out the rest of his days in the waiting room. He even likes the decor."

"You couldn't get him to reveal his secret?"

"Doctor Beeks is working on it. She says he's blocked it out so thoroughly that he panics even under hypnosis. She's afraid he'll go catatonic rather than reveal anything!"

"I've got to know, Al. I think this secret is the key." He chose gray slacks, a pink and blue shirt and cream and smoke silk jacket. The image in the mirror was like something from a paperback fantasy. Even in the chic clothes, Sigurd looked like something from another world. His strange eyes were startling under the pale wings of his brows. He had a classic masculinity, prominent bone structure, and long smoky lashes. Sam studied his reflection. Weird and noble, no wonder people stared. He was beautiful.

Al peered over his shoulder. "Creepy, huh?" he commented, his irreverent humor at odds with the lingering appreciation in his dark eyes.

"I think he's beautiful," Sam admitted. His smile was wistful.

Al frowned. "For a guy, maybe," he agreed reluctantly. He cocked his head. "In a weird sort of way..."

Sam touched the cool glass. "I want to help him, Al. I want to set him free. You have to find out what his secret is. Why he lives this life."

"Sure," Al said faintly. He looked concerned. "Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

Sam shrugged into the silk jacket and slipped on a pair of gray Espadrilles. "I'm fine. I'm nervous about this photo shoot. Sigurd dreaded it." He picked up the valise with the journal. "I haven't been able to figure out why."

"These things can get pretty racy," Al confided with lascivious delight.

"Yeah, well, now that you mention it, I'd rather you stayed away from this one. I'm going to be embarrassed enough as it is."

"Are you sure?" Al asked. He was disappointed, but he was also still concerned that his uptight friend was going to be way out of his depth. "Ziggy says there's a 74% chance that this photo shoot could be Sigurd's ticket."

"What do you mean?" he asked, intrigued but nervous.

Al brightened. "Really unique, provocative pictures can mean a lot of money. Scylla has maneuvered a big percentage of the profits for herself and her brother. The initial pay-out is pretty standard, but the potential is awesome."

"Yeah, but what does 'unique and provocative' mean?" he asked uneasy.

Al leered. "Kinky with artistic flair."

"I was afraid of that." He braced himself and opened the door. Scylla had dressed during his shower. She was still wearing the black silk lingerie, but she'd added a rose colored skirt, and matching jacket and pumps. Her long white hair was done up on her head, little elf locks hanging beguilingly around her heart shaped face.

Al was stunned. His mouth hung open as he did a slow survey. "Wow!" he exclaimed. Abruptly he seemed alarmed. "What the hell happened between you two last night?" he accused.

Sam was hard pressed to ignore him. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Scylla smiled. "I've called the car. They're waiting. You look nervous."

"That's because I am," he mumbled. He opened the door for her and paused to cast a warning glance back at Al. "Stay away!" he hissed.

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Nothing in Sigurd's journal prepared him for the scene that greeted them at an old

but still fabulous mansion on the beach. The stucco walls and Spanish architecture commanded a sprawling old estate. The gardens were wild and overgrown, the pool was drained and invaded with vines loaded with bright blossoms. They were led to an inner courtyard, open to the sky and filled with exotic plants, photography equipment and a huge four poster bed draped with lace and gauzy curtains. "Oh, boy!" Sam mumbled.

They met Gordon. He was thin and intense with vivid blue eyes and long sandy hair. He rarely blinked. Intelligence and sensitivity radiated from his eyes and expressive hands. He looked at the two of them as if searching for cracks in plaster. "Perfect," he pronounced instead of hello.

Scylla's fingers intertwined with Sam's in a firm but soothing grip. Clearly she understood his ire at being viewed like a work of art. Her face was serene, and that more than anything made him realize she was hiding her emotions. She guided him as if he were some kind of rudely animated idiot. No one seemed to notice. Perhaps this was the way it always was, Sigurd's way of assuring his sister had a place at his side. He knew why she rarely modeled herself. Sigurd wrote that her nerves were too fragile, and darkly, that she wanted poses even the most jaded photographers were afraid to use.

Amazed, Sam listened as Scylla greeted those she new in several French and then Italian, effortlessly chatting in Swiss, German and Spanish. There was wary acceptance on the faces of those that were honest, open smiles and discreet kisses from the obsequious. Watching her facile performance took his mind off his nerves. They skimmed past a table festooned with a variety of ominous bondage equipment. "Art," he mumbled disdainfully.

Scylla laughed. "One hopes Gordon has more style."

They wandered into one of the mansion's empty rooms. It was draped with parachutes shading lights and windows. There was a bed in here as well, an antique brass bed. The brass was heavily tarnished black and green. The effect of the voluminous parachute wall coverings was surreal. The silk hung distended from the ceiling and slid off the walls. The bed looked very stark against it. They'd covered the bed in a vibrant Egyptian print of deep red and blue and they were bringing in elegant floor vases filled with arrangements of peacock feathers and plume grass. "Style," Scylla hummed and pressed his hand. "There's hope."

But Sam was staring at the man in the center of the room. He was naked to the waist, tall, every muscle sharply defined by obvious power, and he was the blackest human being Sam had ever seen. His skin was not just black but almost a raven-wing blue, so that the hazy light filtering through the silk bounced off his skin in flickers of gold and blue. The stranger was exactly the color of obsidian. His hair was shaved off his head except at the back where it was very thick, caught in hundreds of tiny braids and gathered at the nape of his neck in a silver band. It hung in a thick gleaming club between his shoulder blades. He turned. His face was beautiful, intense. The dark eyes were expressive and the mouth finely drawn but generous. His nose was arched, almost patrician, and his high cheekbones gave him a regal profile. He stared back with a look of stunned attraction.

Sam experienced the strangest sense of vertigo, as if he were falling forward into

the stranger's distant stare. He shook himself out of it. Scylla's hand was on his arm. Her smile was strangely twisted. "What is it that you feel, brother?" she asked wryly. Her eyes traveled back to the other model. "Could it be true? Opposites attract." There was a wicked edge to her voice. She was drawing him away, her hand possessive on his arm.

They ended up in a lavish bathroom where a makeup chair sat before a long counter and a huge mirror. There were extra lights, unforgiving illumination and a tiny red haired woman in a skimpy halter dress. "Mindy," Scylla greeted with a cool smile. The makeup woman sneered back.

"If it ain't the ice queen," she announced. "Had your morning meal of stray cats yet Scylla?" Her Flushing accent and brave eyes raked the other woman with uncompromising disdain. Her expression for Sam was warmer. "Come and sit down, honey." She spun the chair for him.

"Hi," Sam said weakly.

"Feelin nervous, Sweetheart?" Mindy observed kindly. "Don't be. This guy's a class act. Not like some of them sicko types your sister here scrounges up from the sewer. Ain't nobody gonna hurt you this time. Ain't nobody here could be convinced to." She flicked her eyes meaningfully at Scylla. "Not by nobody, understand?" She turned the chair to face the mirror and smiled appreciatively. "Not for nothin, Siggy, but you got all them Nordic types beat." She kissed his temple lightly.

The image that looked back at Sam was still startling. Just a shade or two darker than the white tiles of the room, his hair a milky silver rope over his shoulder and his eyes like cherry cordials looking back with their fringe of smoky gray lashes and thin brows. Scylla rested her hand on his shoulder. She whispered in his ear, "Insufferable woman. She's the best though. I leave you to her talented if provincial hands."

"I heard that!" Mindy snapped.

"Peasant," Scylla sneered.

"Bitch," Mindy heartily returned at Scylla's retreat. "When you gonna take my advice and get shed of that monster?" she scolded.

"She's my sister," Sam defended.

"Hitler had family too I bet." She scowled. "She's no good for you darlin'. She's got a cold heart. All them bad things been done to ya, all them awful pictures. Sure they look hot. You know." She shrugged. "You're the sexiest freak ever. Man or woman, it don't matter. You touch people deep down inside somehow. That's a gift." She began opening cases and boxes as she talked. "There ain't no need for all that sicko pain crap your sister likes to have you do. And don't tell me you get off on it. I know better. Just like I know it ain't just for show, some of that stuff really does hurt. I've covered up the bruises."

"On the job hazards," Sam explained. He was uncomfortable, yet part of him wanted to know the specifics of just what she was talking about. S&M fetish pictures for risque magazines, he knew about, but had never really seen. Not that he could

remember. The thought did not titillate him, but maybe because he was involved with Sigurd's life, and because of what he was about to face, he was curious.

"Bullshit!" Mindy exclaimed. "Your sister sets that stuff up. I told you and told you. She gets them to do it rougher. She likes to see you suffer." Her face screwed up in a look of loathing. "If I didn't care so much about you I'd run the other way. Somebody's got to look out for ya."

"Thanks," he said sincerely. He sat still while she went to work, chatting animatedly the entire time. Her hands were deft and her critical eyes crinkled around the edges with concentration.

Finally, "Better than mortal man, or woman, deserves," she announced and stepped out of the way so he could see himself.

The effect was subtle yet dramatic. He couldn't actually see the makeup, but all Sigurd's features were enhanced. His dramatic eyes were lined in a soft gray pencil that gave them just enough definition to look larger and darker. His lips were pink and his cheekbones accented with shadow. He looked regal and other-worldly, like a prince from some eldritch kingdom.

"Not for nothin, Siggy, but you just get better lookin'... the longer you sit in my chair," she quipped appreciatively.

"No argument," he agreed, leaning forward.

"You look like you ain't seen yourself before," she said, peering with him at his reflection.

Sam reacted guiltily. "I'm just admiring your work," he defended. He smiled, and the effect in the mirror was unflattering. His generous expressions didn't lend themselves to Sigurd's austere looks.

"What's got into you?" Mindy exclaimed.

"Would you believe another man?" he inquired.

She guffawed bawdily. "More than once, and I bet it was spectacular!" She slapped her hand on his shoulder and continued chortling.

Sigurd's reflection flushed a startling red like a nightlight. His eyes were wide. The light pierced them like cherry colored glass.

"Egad! Must be love. You're blushing," she teased.

Scylla entered abruptly with Gordon in tow. "Darling, everybody is waiting," she said through her teeth. Most of her annoyance directed at the unconcerned make-up artist. Her hand was cold, radiating intense suppressed emotion as she grabbed Sam's hand. The wild light was back in her eyes, giving them a feverish glaze. There was something unwholesome about her eagerness. It made Sam recoil. At once he felt the protective hand of Mindy settle on his shoulder.

"What's the rush?" Mindy asked soothingly. "We're ready. Aren't we gorgeous?"

"I guess so," Sam answered without conviction. He rose slowly. "What do you want me to do?" he asked Gordon.

"Your sister's been suggesting a few things," Gordon said somewhat tersely. "Frankly, I didn't have anything quite so graphic in mind." He seemed to relax as Sam visibly let go a held breath with an expression of relief. "I have a definite image and I want to go for that, but it will be easier for me if we can just try to improvise on a few basic settings at first. You'll either get what I'm trying to say, and I'll get the shots I'm after or we'll come up with something new and great or we'll quit." Gordon cast a steely glance at Scylla as if he was braced for a scene.

"Sure," Sam agreed. He gave Scylla a warning look. "Could I talk to my sister a moment alone?"

Mindy left reluctantly and Gordon left relieved.

Scylla smiled exultantly. "Sigurd the magic!" she exclaimed. "This whole place is charged with it. You'll see." She gripped his arms and stared weirdly up at him. There was bloodlust in her eyes. "My vision. I can taste it. It's out there. It's going to happen."

"I don't understand. What vision? Do you mean some sort of clairvoyant vision?"

"No!" she scoffed impatiently. "I mean something deeper, something more magical. What will be created here today is like a painting I as the artist have been laboring over all my life. My vision is going to come to life today. It's going to be a piece of art that will change things forever. You'll see. After today we'll be gods!"

"I don't want to be a god," he answered simply.

"Why be just an idol if you're going to be worshiped?" she answered contemptuously. "After today, you won't have a choice."

"Scylla, I want you to promise me something."

"No," she said flatly.

But he continued as if the flat denial had never been. "Don't interfere with this. I've got a feeling," he said slowly. "A feeling you might be right about this session. I think it will change things. Just let it happen. Don't try to manipulate it."

"They're all fools," she insisted. "They're nothing more than tools, like paints and brushes. If I thought I could take the pictures I'd do it myself!"

"Listen to me!" he demanded. "You put this together. Now let it happen! Let it, Scylla. I'm afraid your fervor will get in the way of-- of the vision."

Her eyes focused on him intently. "Is that possible?" she asked, more of herself than him.

"If the magic is out there it will happen," he played to her fantasy with conviction.

Her pale head nodded. "Of course," she murmured. "Trust in fate." She looked up and the clear China lights of her eyes swallowed him whole. "You'll suffer for me?" she asked in a child-like voice.

"I swear," he answered solemnly from some knowledge outside himself.

Scylla licked her lips with the pink tip of her tongue. "Good," she pronounced huskily.

Sam shivered, chilled to the bone.

The lights flared harshly canopied by white umbrellas and flexible mirrors. Everything was focused on the bed. Sam allowed himself to be herded towards it. He could feel the giddy sense of rebellion begin in his belly like laughter. The scene was crowded with gaudy people carrying props or merely gossiping on the fringes. They were obvious in their studied attitudes, some pretending not to stare and others pretending interest. There was an unhealthy voyeurism lingering in many eyes.

With only a vague and unsettling notion of what he was in for and an imagination working overtime, Sam poised on the edge of bolting. A warm hand settled on his shoulder. He turned. Beautiful dark eyes like some wise forest animal, calm and gentle, met his startled gaze. The strangest moment. The strangest sense of non-verbal communication settled with certainty on his skittering mind.

Sam swallowed. His heart was still in his chest as if it had stopped beating. He tried to think of a time when another person had ever had this affect on him. It was like being pulled forward out of his skin, out of his own thoughts and going gladly...

Certainly this man radiated an undeniable charm. It was powerful, profoundly sexual in a way that made the little hairs stand up all over Sam's body. Though part of his mind shrieked with disbelief, he was deeply stirred. Even his intellect yielded to a sudden, strong attraction. He was going forward. The silent black man was pulling him with just his eyes to the intensely lit bed.

Sam's inquisitive mind was piqued by the unforeseen undertow of his emotions. His body was less covert in expressing its self. His hands touched the man's breast and felt hard muscle under smooth skin. The light played blue over the intense depth of his color. It was fascinating in a way that Sam had not anticipated. He could feel the steady thump of the heart and the deep flex of breath.

No words of introduction. No incisive, intrusive direction from the photographer. Just a stunned silence whirling with distant murmurs. The sudden whine of a camera and the sense of bodies moving beyond the lights. A man's voice muttering over and over excitedly, "magic, magic, magic." Sam stood still as arms enfolded him. A large hand cradled his head against the hard black chest. His heart remembered to beat and lurched into a familiar, shocking rhythm. Lust surged through his body like the blood pounding in his ears.

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In the all revealing glow of the waiting room, Al confronted his elegant guest. Sigurd moved with slow grace, even his hands gestured with aristocratic refinement. His eyes remained haunted, blood colored irises dark with something struggling behind them.

"The Dark," he said in answer to Al's insistent questioning. "The Dark. How can I tell you about it? I've never spoken about it. I try to forget."

"Sam thinks everything ties to it," Al prompted.

Sigurd nodded. "Everything does. For us anyway. I will tell you. I think I want to tell. Anything seems permissible in this strange place. It's as if I'm outside the life where my promises had meaning."

"Don't go Fruitloops on me now," Al demanded uneasily.

Sigurd laughed softly, again with that cultured serenity. "I think I'm saner at this moment than I have ever been," he admitted. Then he settled his shoulder against the glowing wall and tried to compose his thoughts.

Al observed how Sigurd's hair almost blended with the wall. It was unsettling the way only his eyes seemed to stand out from his surroundings. It was hard to look and yet harder still not to. He seemed like a half finished sculpture only half free from the marble.

"We were children," Sigurd began. "Orphans and worse, outcasts because of our looks. Rumania is a poor country, insulated and ancient. Superstition still rules the lives of country people. They called us Gypsys, but we were not. I don't know where we came from, only that we seemed to belong nowhere. A rich man took us in. I remember him as kind and big. He was from Austria and he took us with him first there and then to Spain where he had this huge estate. I thought we were blessed.

"No I won't tell you his name," Sigurd said dully. "Perhaps you know it anyway. There we were in this ancient place. Always warm and always full when my early memories are full of just the opposite. Men and women came. Rich, all of them, and all from countries that seemed fabulously exotic. Beautiful parties filled the castle and spilled out on the grounds. I loved to spy on them as a child. I was too young to be part of them, but Scylla, only a few years older, seemed to be the very center of attention.

"I grew up with haphazard tutoring. I dressed in archaic finery and played with toys that were covered in dust in a nursery that dated back centuries. Scylla and I were like wild things let loose in a palace." The albino smiled with wistful memory. Painful recollection darkened his features as he stared into Al's interested but impatient face.

"I also grew up observing the old high holy days of pagan worship. I was ignorant of the fact that the masquerades and other parties turned into orgies and Black Sabbats. Pentagrams and goat's heads carved in gold, silver and bone were normal things. I

didn't know, because she was protecting me the entire time, that Scylla was the focus of these depraved sensualists. These debauched aristocrats had fashioned her into a tiny high priestess for their carnal despotism. Their religion," he snarled the world. "Scylla was nine years old. She carried herself like a self-assured woman of thirty. I had no idea that beneath all the jewels our benefactor draped her with, all the luxuries we both enjoyed, that Scylla was bathing almost nightly in a veritable inkwell of atrocity. Those elegant high born people did things to her that would choke the most insensate whore ever born." His tone was flat, devoid of rage as if he couldn't express it and still speak.

Al was speechless for once but outraged enough for both of them. "Those devils!" he managed to exclaim.

"They were that," Sigurd agreed. "When Scylla told me about it, I didn't believe her, though by then even I knew that they were bad people. I didn't want to believe. I didn't want to lose the life we had. I called it safety then... But Scylla had become frantic. It seemed that I'd caught the eye of the revelers and many were clamoring that I be brought into their circle of worship. Scylla was losing her battle to insulate me. She was terrified that our benefactor would break his promise to her and force me to become another Avatar for their carnal veneration."

"So she killed him," Al guessed.

"Oh, yes," Sigurd agreed with eerie intensity. "She did. She led me to a stone room deep beneath the castle. It was like an old granary or store room. The ceiling was low and the heavy beams were black with soot. There was a hole in the floor. A deep narrow shaft. Scylla and I tied a rope to one of the beams and dropped it down this hole. And then she took me out the door and down passages I never knew existed. Far beneath the wine cellars and all the storage rooms was a large chamber. Scylla said it was once a dungeon. The doors were iron and taller than a man. The room itself was clean unlike the storeroom with the hole. I saw an alter and a huge pentagram on the floor. All the trappings of the castles colorful self-made religion of part devil worship, part Egyptian mysticism, and equal measures of ancient ways dredged from all corners of the old world. I also saw our rope dangling from a hole in the ceiling that was just above an open fire pit.

"Here Scylla told me all the things that were done by these people I had watched with such envy and delight. Here she outlined her plan. I followed her as we went back to the blackened storeroom. There we hauled up the rope. We stole cooking oil from the kitchens and poured it around the opening. And we hauled endless bundles of thorns and flowers to decorate the secret chamber for the Sabbat. We made men and women of straw and dressed them in old clothes, because this was what Scylla said the old rites required. These preparations were not done in secret and some of Scylla's wealthy worshipers helped us pile the room with these offerings.

"I was thrilled by the idea. Thrilled to be the one to sneak down at midnight and bar the iron doors sealing everyone in. I was proud to be strong enough to haul my sister up the shaft on our secret rope. Together we'd flee into the night. I exercised vigorously in the coming days. We practiced with me hauling Scylla up into the branches of trees and into the hayloft of the stable. Scylla fasted to be sure she would fit. And we began to plan our escape.

"The night came. They were chanting in their beautiful silk and velvet robes. Flowers were in their hair and around their waists. And they all carried gifts of liquor to spill out on the altar and the straw effigies we'd made. I remember the doors were heavy, too heavy and rusted in their places, for me to move. A man turned from the chanting and helped me. I don't think he even heard the bar go down and the bolts go home. He smiled and licked his lips when he looked at me. Just before the doors scraped shut, I saw my sister standing on the alter. She was naked except for necklaces of jewels covering her breasts. She looked like what they believed she was, a priestess.

"When I made my way to the storeroom, I knew something was wrong. A horrible thick smoke was filling the room. I could hear my sister screaming my name. 'The rope! The rope!' she screamed. I scrambled through the choking smoke to find it and lower it down. I could feel her weight take hold even as she screamed for me to pull her up. I tried. I braced my feet and pulled but she wasn't fitting. I felt her let go. I almost ran down to open the doors but I heard her yelling for me to try again. This time she came easier. Then a sudden hard pull down and I almost lost her. Scylla was shrieking as if burned. "Let go of me!" and I knew someone had her by the foot.

"Something possessed me then. I pulled on that rope with strength beyond my body. Her head appeared from the floor. She was coughing and covered with oily soot. I kept pulling because her arms were down at her sides. I realized she'd tied the rope around her waist instead of hanging onto it. Maybe she knew someone would grab her. Her shoulders were scraped and bloody but her eyes blazed in her blackened face with unholy triumph. I untied the rope with numb and bloody hands.

"The heat that blasted up from the hole was like a furnace now. The screams funneled up and echoed around the little room filling it with sound. We were like singed cherubs cowering by the entrance to hell. The beating on the iron doors reverberated up through stone and timber, but there was no one but us to hear it. Hands clawed at the pipe and voices called up to us with pleas and threats and curses. I was sobbing and wanted to run away, but Scylla said no. She closed her eyes and listened as the words dissolved and the stench drove me to drag her across the floor. Smoke followed us from the room. The stench of the burning clung to our skin and hair. The sound of that night fills my dreams... That terrible pounding and that wailing screaming cacophony of voices.

"Scylla was never the same. All her strength, everything that enabled her to protect and provide for us all our childhood, even her poised adult-superiority that so often annoyed me as a boy, shattered. I picked up the pieces. I swore that I would take her place as the one who made the sacrifices, providing for us both in the only way we knew. Scylla guided us from the estate. We buried all the valuables we could find outside the wall in case we ever wanted to come back and get them. We rode a horse to the village and took a bus to the city. It didn't take Scylla long to find us another... benefactor. This one had relatively simple tastes. Nothing anyway that young boys hadn't been doing for such men since the dawn of time." Here he stopped. His smile was twisted and bitter, but his eyes met Al's, fearless of recrimination.

"Dear Lord," Al whispered. His face was very pale and his compassionate brown eyes were wide with horrified dismay. "You didn't know she was going to set fire to the place?"

"No. I never dreamed, but she never intended anything different. Maybe you can't understand, but my sister's life and mind are shaped by forces that have nothing to do with this world. She's lost in it. She seeks the things she understands. Dark, terrible things, by the world's reckoning. Some part of her wants to purge our sins and this drives her to do the things she does, to want the things she wants of me. She sees herself and those diabolic men in these images that she strives to construct. She wants to punish both in one and she has the perfect subject in me."

"But why? Why let her do it?" Al protested.

Sigurd stared blankly. "It makes her happy," he said simply.

"Ziggy, get Beeks in here!" Al called out with alarm. "Sigurd, you talk to the good doctor while I go check on my friend. I think he needs to take sis more seriously."

□□□□□

On the bed, Sam's sense of reality suspended in a vortex of spiraling passion. The camera's prurient fascination intruded no more than the eye of the sun on a secluded beach. The prominent features of his companion were like the heroic features of a town square monument, and yet the dark eyes burned with compassion and intelligence.

Sam was oddly calm and quite lost in sensation. His clothing was pulled away with such artistry and such absolute lack of pretension that it hardly felt like being naked, more like being painted with air, and yes, with another man's skin.

"I am Darius Drin Bey. I come from a place where the sun shines on the wide land and the sweet sea. All my life I've dreamed of far off places swathed in cool winds and endless snow," said the rich baritone in Sam's ear. "My arms have held the most beautiful women in the world and the strongest men, but they did not recognize those bodies like they do yours." He nuzzled the back of Sam's neck. His large, strong hand caressed Sam's buttocks with firm, kneading strokes. He pulled Sam against him, fitting their bodies together, sealing Sam's back to his belly. Sam gasped and heard a low moan escape his lips, the voice of a stranger.

"Such white skin," said the voice. He chuckled, taking Sam's hand in his and stretching their arms out entwined. "All hues and none. The opposite ends of the human spectrum. I feel myself drawn to you like a soul to the light, and you?"

"I feel drawn," Sam admitted awkwardly. He held his breath as Darius reached his other hand down to cover his exposed nakedness.

"Drawn tight," Darius chided gently. He whispered in Sam's ear. "I would send these fools away."

Sam found himself nodding wordlessly as his breath caught. He heard the command come from Darius to the room, but his own heart deafened him to the

words. He kept his eyes closed like a shy child. Commotion erupted all around them. A cat-like screech. His eyes flew open as a familiar voice shouted a warning. "Sam!"

Al shouted as Scylla flailed at the bed with a heavy electrical cord. She was shouting. "No, no. It's all wrong. What's this? What's this?" The heavy cord slashed down and caught Sam as he rolled from the bed in the blinding lights. He caught the cord and pulled it from her hands as he grappled with her. "You promised!"

"What do you want!" Sam shouted.

Al answered. "You don't want to know, Sam."

Scylla went stiff. "You know what I want. You know!"

"What? You want them to tie me to the bed and torture me for the camera? You want rape and pain. Why?" he demanded.

Her wide, crazed eyes locked on his. "I want you to fight back. I want you to come up from the pit. Don't you see? I'm still down there until you do. I'm still there." She sobbed.

Al interjected as the bedlam tumbled into the room with confusion and alarm, "Say you understand, Sam. Say, say, Scylla," Al took a somewhat oratory stance. "I pulled you out once. Let me pull you out again. Trust me. I know. I understand. Without experiencing all that you did, I still understand. I always have. That's why I've done everything you wanted, but it has to stop. For both our sakes."

Sam spoke every word after Al, not really understanding what he was saying. But Scylla kept sobbing brokenly.

She clung to him. "I want it to stop. I want it to be that moment again when I was free of the pit and your eyes met mine. You were still clean. So white and clean that you shone even through the smoke. And I knew we were safe. I knew." She gulped for breath as she nestled against his naked chest. "It wasn't until later that I realized you'd never understand me. I'd always be alone, unless you'd been where I was. And sometimes I wanted to live it all again through you as if I could make it all different somehow."

"But it can be," Sam said. "Starting right now."

She looked puzzled as she pulled away. "You were loving it. He was touching you and you were loving it."

Al gulped. "Oh boy." He looked scandalized.

"That's what I mean by change," Sam insisted. He felt cool cloth drape his shoulders and Darius behind him. "Love, beauty, healing instead of all this sickness, this insistence on depravity. Our lives could be full of beauty, Scylla."

She stared at Darius's hand on his shoulder. "I hear the pounding," she said dreamily. Only Al understood.

"Oh boy," Al said frantically. "Sam she's going to lose it. Watch her!"

"What pounding?" Sam asked gently.

"It's so hot," she replied. "My feet were scalded." She walked away and held her hand to the powerful photographic lamp. Sam rushed forward to grab her away at the sickening hiss of burning flesh. "And you know?" she said, childlike. "I looked down and he was looking up through the hole at me. Shaking his fist and yelling. I see that still sometimes..." He wrapped the sheet around him and kept hold of her wrist. He pulled her over to sit on the bed. Suddenly she looked full at him. "You're not my brother," she said. Sam was frozen by the awful clarity in her mad eyes. "Sigurd's abandoned me."

"No I haven't," Sam said reasonably. He knelt down at her feet.

Gordon came up and said quietly, "I've called a doctor."

"Call a priest," Scylla said tartly. "I think my head is starting to spin." Gordon backed away quickly and began clearing the room again. "What do they know?" she said with contempt. "Fools." She seemed her old acerbic self. She looked at Sam. "Do you think you and your new love have a real chance to be happy?"

"I think every one has a chance," he said sincerely. "Don't you want me to be happy?"

"I did. Once it was all I wanted in the world. The price was high." She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Yes. I think if one of us has a chance it's you. I've always thought that." He let her stand and pull him to his feet. She embraced him. "Be happy," she instructed and kissed him dispassionately, for the first time like a sister.

Sam watched the languid sway of her graceful body dreamily weave her way to the crowed doorway.

"Sam..," Al warned uneasily.

Sam was galvanized into action. "Scylla."

She turned and smiled. "Into the pit," she said and plunged her fist into one of the powerful lamps. Her back arched as her hand closed on glass and wire and surging electricity.

Powerful arms caught Sam around the waist and a deep baritone roared, "Don't touch her!" He struggled but could not win free. She was dead anyway, though her pale eyes stared blood-shot and wide and she was still standing animated by the electrical current. "Pull the cord from the socket," Darius commanded through the horrified din of disbelief and sickness.

The white body crumpled, twitching to the floor. "You could not have saved her," Darius said gently as he let Sam go. Darius held out his arms, physically ushering everyone from the room.

"Al," Sam cried. "I failed. I was here to save her." His voice was choked with tears

and shock.

"No," Al said, just as shocked but understanding, more than Sam could, her reasons. "You were here," he said at last, "to save Sigurd, and I think you've done that."

"How? I didn't do anything."

"Sam, you did. Rather we did. Sigurd's had the chance to bare his soul of a burden that was killing them both. This way, even though she died, he won't be blamed, and... Well the only way to show you what you've done is to show you. Look." He held up a photo. It showed two men embracing. One was black like the wing of a raven. His handsome face was serene and intent. He held a man as white as cream who's snowy hair was tied in a long shimmering tail bound in silver. The black hands were onyx, the fingers splayed across the luminous opal skin of the other's back. The albino's hands were at his sides like a dancer in a swoon. His long back was slightly arched, his eyes closed, the ashen lashes drifting in long sweeps under pale brows. His pink lips were open in passionate abandon.

Al held up another and in this the figures were slightly turned. The albino's head was thrown back in ecstasy. The silver hair spilled back like a rope of silk. Their perfect erections were pressed against each other and entwined, phalluses of alabaster and onyx.

"He's very... provocative," Sam looked away blushing furiously.

Al's voice was strange, very soft and tender. "Sam, that's you. It may look like him, but this photo was from today's session. It's very famous. The contract Scylla forged insures Sigurd a very healthy income. He owns these pictures. They've inspired painters and poets as well as other photographers. The original prints hang in prestigious museums."

Sam did not look at his friend. He was thinking of moments lost in a wash of intense feeling. He wasn't ashamed, but he didn't want to face Al's bantering. None came. He did look up and Al was looking not at him but at Scylla. Sam covered her with the sheet so recently wrapped around his body.

"What a shame," Al said sadly.

Sam got up and found his trousers. "It didn't have to happen," Sam agreed.

"Maybe it did," Al murmured knowingly.

"You know something you haven't said," Sam observed. He was still shaking as he buckled his belt and gathered up his shirt.

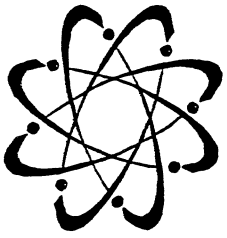
Al shrugged heavily. "It's a long, very sad, very sick tale, my friend. I think you're better off not knowing. I wish I'd never heard it. I think it's going to haunt me for a long time."

"Al?" Sam asked suddenly. "Why am I still here?"

Darius entered carefully. He didn't ask how Sam was. His face was set in hard lines but his eyes were filled with gentle concern. Sam felt the blood rush to his cheeks again with furious betrayal of his emotions. He was acutely aware of Al's scrutiny. "Ambulance is on it's way, my friend. Do you want me to stay with you?"

Before he could answer, Sam heard Al exclaim, "Yes! I mean, say yes, Sam!"

But Sam was staring into those incredible eyes and visualizing the photographs. His heart was hammering and his breath caught on the word. So he said the first thing that rushed to his lips. "Always." And leaped.



THE PROFESSIONALS

RAY

Burning down barriers
knocking down walls
trying to save the world
one blow at a time.
The fire of my passion
The strength of my rage
narrowly focused on the good fight.
I honestly thought bringing
law and order to the world
would bring it closer
to where I needed it most
Inside where my mind and heart
was so full of chaos
questions and conflicting emotion.

No matter how brightly I burned
How hard I fought
Peace and order never came.

But you with your cocky self-assurance
You with your smooth easy style
taught me to laugh
and that the darkest days
are lighter shared with a friend
I can depend on.

Some say your nature runs against mine
but, for the first time,
I see the world is full of conflict
but my soul knows its place and function
My heart embraces your simple sense of direction
like a blind man reaches for his guide

THE PROFESSIONALS

BODIE

I'd as well've not had a past
All I really need is now and you
fiery and bright
constant as a guiding star
The rules may change
but we remain true

Somewhere along the line
I lost my need to be on my own
I don't feel the loss
look what I've gained
Brother in arms
we will never be alone

THE PROFESSIONALS

SUNSHINE

The sheen and the shadow
of your agate green eyes
play havoc with my mercenary soul
making me doubt my creed
of independence
and question even my basest desires

I've loved and been loved
but I never trusted
I've always been the strong one
there never being anyone to put my faith in
but me.

Now I watch the wind through the window
rake through your unruly hair
You smile
as you load your magazine
and I look away quickly
before you can see
the strength of my trust
has captured me.

THE PROFESSIONALS

THE MERCENARY

Comrade in arms
solid fighter
with a cavalier smile
but this is all you've ever known
isn't it?

Not for you
perplexing questions
of motivation and morality
Even the painful answers are always simple
You leave the big picture
to wiser men as if their decisions
could not concern you
and then lay your life on the line
for them and their shadowy causes.

Do I confuse you
with my angst and all my questions?
I rage at injustice
and I have failed to understand
your complacency
But I have come to comprehend
that war and its twisted codes of honor
are all you know
of law and order.

I want to heal
the wounds
of your bitter past
show you what brothers are for
I want to always be
within your reach
feel your smile
trust your strength
And prove to you
that you are worth more than a weapon of war

THE PROFESSIONALS

COPPER

Comrade in arms
sinew and firestorm
you rail at fate and circumstance
bashing down the doors of the wicked
like an avenging angel
only to find yourself later
in some dark corner morose and melancholy
asking yourself questions no soldier should.

You are too full of curiosity
and morality to be a creature of such outrageous energy
Even your worst mistakes
are at full speed
I ride out your waves of rage
vent them on me
if need be
and I will weather the storm.

How can I prove
my love?
is it enough to say I trust?
Ask of me anything my friend
I'll swear it outloud if I must.

THE PROFESSIONALS

THE FIRST DAY OF SUMMER

You come bounding up
with your ebullient spirit
steady as the prevailing wind
you carry me along
Not for you the complicated questions
that plague and paralyze me
You tease the smile
I didn't know I was hiding
Warming my heart
with your zest for life
And just when I think
there are not enough willing women
in the world to appease you
you turn the full of your attention
on me.

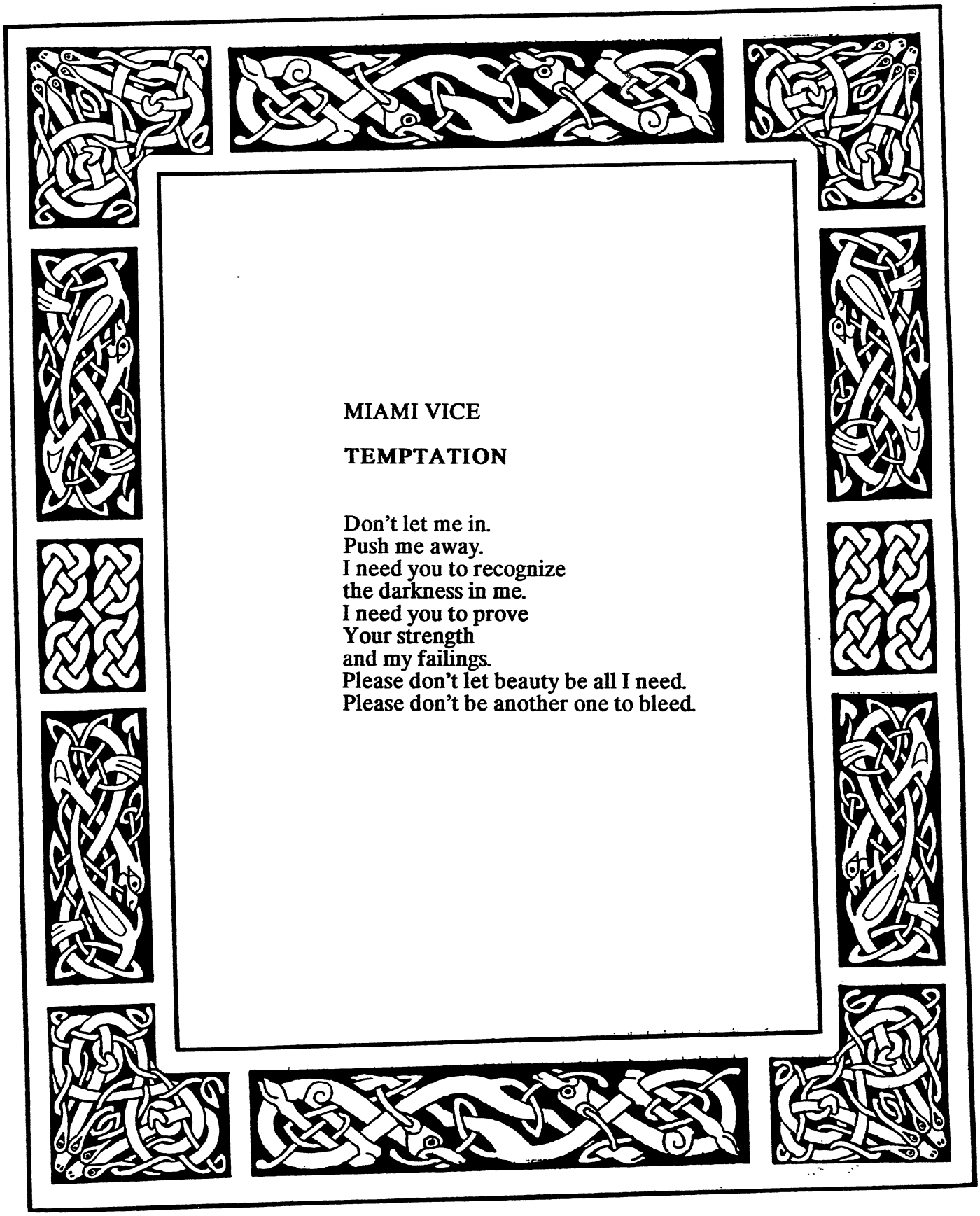
Suddenly, it's the first day of summer
I'm basking in the heat
of a great glowing sun
I can't get my clothes off fast enough
wanting to feel your warmth on my skin
The bleak long days of darkness
are washed away
I am radiant and carefree
touched and changed by you
cradled in the sure and certain strength
of your simple convictions
and the knowledge of your love
It's as if the winter of my past was a dream
and I will never be cold again.

MIAMI VICE

MIAMI TONIGHT

Miami tonight
alive with electric colors.
The sound of a thousand instruments
playing one rhythmic tune.
You and I move as one
in a dance that has dangerous steps.
Just when we think we know all the variations
a new one comes up to trip us.
We can't afford to fall.

See the cars go by like elegant sharks
their prey saunters past gaudy buildings
and colored lights
dressed like candy coating.
The air has the scent of menace.
The streets have the heat of blood.
It's all a fast moving river
of cocaine induced corruption.
And you and I exist to stem the flood



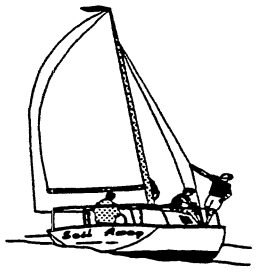
MIAMI VICE

TEMPTATION

Don't let me in.
Push me away.
I need you to recognize
the darkness in me.
I need you to prove
Your strength
and my failings.
Please don't let beauty be all I need.
Please don't be another one to bleed.

MIAMI VICE

GOLD FEVER



by

Deveroux Dane

In a silk suit the color of butter and a thin white shirt that hinted at flesh another man would have looked effeminate. He looked sleek and dangerous. A candy coated blade.

The shimmering Miami sands and sapphire sea stretched out under a pale blue sky. Nothing more than a backdrop for two characters lounging against a gray concrete wall.

The man in the yellow Italian suit turned to his companion. A black man in a charcoal double-breasted suit with a diamond in his ear. They didn't speak, but I could sense their communication. I sat a little straighter and leaned forward, my interest ignited by a taste of intrigue.

In Miami there are many posers many pretenders to that ultimate state of self-assurance that only a true predator possess. Animal power, lazy, sensual grace this man had in abundance. His hair was long and gold lifting in the warm salt breeze.

His gaze, obscured by expensive black lenses, swept over me with a slow even scrutiny. I was delightfully chilled with the notion that he may have really noticed me lounging among the colorful collection of trendy diners. I knew it was unlikely, but the fantasy touched me.

When the pair moved off I rose and followed them. The white Testarossa, crouched in a narrow alley some distance from a collection of stained mattresses and cardboard boxes. The filth and the Ferrari purred sex with a decadent disregard for morality.

I smiled. The accents of my native language familiar in the sound of the powerful engine coming to life and the rustle of trash crushed and scattered by the expensive tires.

Yes.

Moving out of the way as the car backed out of the alley, I caught a glimpse of blond hair, and a gold watch on a tanned wrist. My heart was beating fast. My mouth was dry. I could catch his scent from the open window as the car slid by me, cheap cigarettes, expensive cologne and male sweat.

Yes.

The stucco wall was warm against my back as I watched him drive off. I breathed in the Ferrari's exhaust as if it were sacred incense. My center was burning with desire. Happily I closed my eyes and soaked up the warmth of the sun. I always knew it would happen this way, at first sight.

Yes.

□□□□□

One week later and the bar is pulsing with Europop and pumping hearts. Over the click of classes and the sharp laughter I hear something that sounds like a kettle whistling shrilly in my mind. I turn and see him behind one of the etched glass partitions. He is sitting with the black man and two others. One is Tito Ramon a former street success who has moved up to the arms trade. He has a license but the main of his inventory is extensively black market. He's been doing well and makes the rounds of the best clubs flashing his new wealth and sense of importance.

I lean back to feel the press of the Sig Sauer handgun holstered in the small of my back. I bought it from Tito. I like the feel of it there pressing against my spine. Guns are fashionable, as long as they're expensive and large caliber. I prefer the look of knives. I wish we could wear them like they did in ancient days when the weight of sword would add swagger to a man's hips, and women wore fanciful daggers wicked and sharp.

The four men sit for perhaps half an hour. Tito and his companion leave and I see the black man look worried, but my blond smiles sardonically and finishes his drink.

I follow them out to the parking lot to a blue Cadillac convertible. The black man gets in. His voice is full of weary sarcasm. The blond declines the offer of a ride. He growls good night and grins as he mentions a club down the street. I move off in that direction happy to be ahead of my quarry.

This club is more expensive, more exclusive. The decor is French Caribbean and the music is more sensuous. I take care to settle in obscurity at a table behind two pretty women in short tight skirts. I pay attention to them for awhile, following their flirtatious eyes to the two Latinos at the bar.

He arrives, orders a whiskey and a beer and drinks them standing at the streetside bar. Tonight he is wearing a dark blue jacket and a pale pink shirt. I watch him move, balanced and self-assure. His eyes assessing the shadows and the passers by with equal scrutiny. I could tell the affectation was instinctive, a wild thing's caution, a predator's economy of motion.

Obviously he is waiting for someone. I watch as he rolls the end of an unfiltered cigarette across his wet lower lip and hesitates expressively before lighting it. His hands are elegant and his mouth is slightly open exposing very white teeth. In the glint of the lighter I can see his eyes are green, dark green like the color of antique glass. I wait to see what manner of moth is attracted to this particular flame.

She comes, not from the street, but from inside the club. She is wearing a glittering strapless evening dress in a becoming deep blue. Her smile is silky. Her hair is a deep, liver color. Her shapely calves are sheathed in the best stockings and have that awkward muscling that result from a habit of very high heels.

I surmise that she saw him arrive and has just applied a fresh layer of lip gloss. She carries herself with too much confidence to be merely ornamental, therefore I suspect he makes her nervous. He smiles openly and kisses her in greeting. She takes his hand and leads him into the rich interior. Again my thoughts turn to knives. The sharpest of edges, the deft turn of a wrist and a font of bright scarlet sprinkling from well cared for skin.

Dry lips slide over my teeth in a feral smile as I contemplate the thin edge of the glass in my hand. I must go and get my car so that I can be ready to follow him. I know what he has planned. There was no love in his pretty smile for the woman. There was the happy greeting of someone about to unwrap a gift. She will show him off for an hour or so and then they will drive to his place or hers, but after... after, he will go home. I can't hide my delight and laugh outloud. The two women at the table beside me turn to stare. They giggle nervously, but one licks her lips and eyes me speculatively.

From the club to a row of pastel condominiums I follow them in the vehicle I bought for just this purpose. It is a white Ford pickup ten years old and patched with brown tempera paint to look like rust. I have bought the brightest tarps I could find and stretched them over a frame work of trash cans and empty crates. It is the perfect changeable invisible vehicle. Stripped of paint and cargo it passes unrecognizable.

Before dawn I follow the Testarossa to the marina and a boat with the name Saint Vitus Dance painted on the stern. He parks the car without locking it and walks with the weary confidence of a man headed home. I can see the hazy smile on his handsome lips and the gilded shadow of new beard. Somehow with the aftereffects of sex, sleeplessness and alcohol he still manages to look pruriently elegant. His rough edge is like the tarnish on a fine work of silver and cannot disguise his obvious quality.

I slip into the warm unhealthy water the expensive boats are nestled in. The sea smells of oil and sewage, clinging to my silk and linen, matting my dark hair with grease and salt. It is the filth of decadence, diluted and now disturbed.

Faint lights reflect on the dark surface of the polluted marina, but the water itself is absolutely black. There is a foul mystery beneath me I am sure. A tantalizing tangle of garbage, and lost treasures, wallets and watches fallen from wealthy wrists and pockets; all things overboard not washed out to sea. But the same intrepid souls who would sail all day to dive among some fabled wreck, would never seek more assured wealth here so close to shore. The horror lies too close to the mind. Perhaps there is a forest of dead bodies tangled in the noisome weeds just below the gleaming hulls of the tethered boats.

There is a mighty Scarab speed boat moored next to the St. Vitus. It belongs to him. I can feel it. My smile stretches over my face as I add up, Italian suits, gold Rolex, Ferrari, sail boat, speed boat. Drug dealer is my total. He has that sort of reckless decadence that would place him outside the law. Like a whore he would pander to the depravity beneath and all around him, like the best and most expensive whore, he would seem a stratosphere above his fellows, and yet still be a whore.

The idea settles in me, satisfies me. It's easy to justify doing anything to a whore. And that's what he is, or will be. My whore.

The idea excites me. I caress the cool side of his boat with my body turning to liquid heat at the thought. My golden boy-whore.

Yes.

Something inhuman moves and shifts a great bulk across the bow. I swim alongside the boat and look up. A huge reptilian face peers down at me. The head is wide, the teeth huge. It cannot see me, but knows that I am there. A hiss like cold water on hot metal rumbles from its huge throat. I am confused. I am momentarily afraid. This has nothing to do with my picture of this man. This cold and scaly demon. I close my eyes. "Go away!" I tell the vision, but it remains. It thrashes its head back and forth with a roar.

"Elvis!" A raspy voice scolds. "Give it a rest."

The alligator rumbles and growls in answer and shifts its considerable bulk aft. I see its wide tail sweep over the side and give the side of the craft a hefty whack. This is meant for me I know. The boat quivers as the beast ambles slowly to the rear of the boat and drops down to crawl through the hatch.

I use the motion and the noise to cover my movements. I pull myself up and lay alongside the windows where I can look inside without being discovered.

The cabin is scrupulously clean and well ordered. No pans no dishes in the tiny galley sink or on its small white counter. There is only a bottle of Jack Daniels on the table and a single glass next to a dewy bottle of beer.

My man is smiling as he steps around the demanding bulk of the huge alligator. He talks to it with grudging pleasure and sarcastic love. There is a purr in his voice roughened by exhaustion. He opens the small refrigerator and unwraps plastic from a raw chicken. He tosses it casually in the air. It never hits the ground. With a snap of massive jaws the beast snatches the fleshy morsel before it lands. With a quick succession of aggressive bites the food is devoured.

My heart slams against my nerves and my groin stirs. The snarl and snap is sexual, powerful. The crush of jaws and the swallowing. It's like the gun, masculine, unforgiving.

The blond swallows his beer and pulls off his jacket revealing a Galco holster and an expensive gun. I don't recognize the gun. I try to get a better look at it. My brain surging with a passionate desire to obtain one just like it. Yes, exactly like it. I take note of his brand of cologne. I must have that too. I must wear it when I come to him.

Off goes the Galco and the mystery gun. He stretches and pulls off the pink t-shirt revealing perfect gold skin and delectable muscles. He is not stunningly muscular, not toned to perfection, but rather he is smooth. He is sleek, like his car, like this boat. His lines are elegant and gracefully curved. His power is graceful. His strength is corded silk.

As he frees himself from his baggy trousers and strips down to blue silk Y-fronts, he confronts his reflection in a mirror. He groans and rubs his shadowed chin with a rueful smile. He strips of his gold Rolex with a grimace at the time.

I feel like he is performing for me. All the little gestures, the play of sinews beneath his smooth skin, seem orchestrated. I am abruptly separated from the intimacy I thought to achieve by secretly watching him in the privacy of his home. Anger grows feeding frustration.

He must be mine tonight. Tonight while he radiates this confidence, this arrogance, this damnable self-conscious elegance that allows his private moments to be devoid of awkward humanity.

I give up my other goal to follow him and learn every aspect of his life. I had wanted to assimilate his character, permeate his every moment, make him mine. Now I want to conquer this aspect of him.

The phone rings. He groans as he turns comes out of the head and grabs it from its hi-tech cradle. "Yeah," he answers brusquely. No treasured hint of his name. My teeth are on edge. "What?" he exclaims disgusted. "Oh, man.... Yeah, I'll be there. Sleep? Explain it to me sometime, pal. I forget how it goes."

He laughs and steps over the slumbering alligator to pull clothes from the closet: pastel blue pants, white Espadrilles, white t-shirt, gun and harness, a white linen jacket with broad, blue-gray stripes. He grabs his wallet, keys and cigarettes as he rushes from the cabin.

I lay still. On my back I watch him jog down the dock and up to the parking lot. The white car rumbles to life and glides away past my disreputable Ford. My frustrated rage is replaced by the delightful prospect of playing in his abandoned domain. I roll to my feet and silently slip through the hatch into the cabin. It smells of him. I pick up a half empty pack of Lucky Strikes and suck at the unlit end and then replace it carefully in the pack, pleased that his lips will one day draw where I have touched. His cologne is Bill Blass; I splash a little on my neck as I step around the now fretful reptile. It is waiting for me to leave a limb just long enough within its reach. It twitches its formidable tail in growing rage, but I am too nimble and now I smell like its master.

I want to lay down on his bed, crawl between his sheets which are dark and expensive. I am still wet. I smell like bilge and sea water. Instead I look through his closets, his books and his treasures. I find the hidden guns and the ammo. There are two boxes of .45 Silvertips and two boxes of 10mm. I didn't even know there was such a thing as 10mm. I decide that it must go with that beautiful strange weapon he carries.

I pour a little whiskey into his glass and let my lips linger where his have touched. I run my tongue over the rim, pretending it is his lips I am caressing. The liquor is warm, and smoky, like his green eyes. Delightful.

I have a gift for him in my pocket. I take it out, unstop the lid and pour the entire contents into the whiskey bottle. Will whiskey change its effects? I don't know. Maybe I won't be here when he drinks it? These thoughts are dispelled in an instant. Everything will be fine. It's all so perfect; better than I'd hoped. The fact that he lives on a boat has opened up a whole new realm of wonderful possibilities. Further proof that he was made for this, for me. Sometimes I can think that, but it doesn't really go well. This time I'm sure. I felt it when I first saw him, and what can that mean but it was all meant to be?

Chilled and damp I climb into my truck and head home. There are only a couple of hours until dawn and I have to shower, pack and get ready to go back to the marina and wait. I want it to be soon. I do, but I also hope he doesn't return until evening. I'd like it to be night when we come together. There is a shiver of terror in me for my audacious drugging of his whiskey. There is no telling when he will drink it. I carried the drug with me for days just in case the opportunity would present itself to slip it to him, but I pictured a bar, some sly deception, a little slight of hand.

Clean and freshly dressed, I check my bag. All my toys are packed and a fresh change of clothes, two pairs of underwear.... Should I pack my swimsuit? I toss it in. This idea of the boat has added romance to my scenario. I'm an expert sailor. As I said it's all so perfect! Happily I add sunblock to my kit. New toothbrush and travel size deodorant, toothpaste, shampoo and conditioner. The radio is playing Tainted Love by Softcell.

I dance, spinning on the hardwood as I rush through my careful deliberations.

Is it terror or anticipation? I don't know. My heart has a little thrilling ache that makes me want to shiver and laugh. When I think of him in my power the little ache feels squeezed in a fist. I'm giddy with the elicit pleasure of my plans. I could stop now. I could with just this to remember, just this delightful preliminary, but I'd always wonder what it would be like to have gone all the way. All the way, ohh yeah... I bet his skin is warm. I bet he tastes like salt and honey. I bet he fights like a demon.

All day I wait here and there keeping an eye out from my freshly washed truck. I drive off to get fast food and come back hoping to find his car in the lot. I tease myself with little games, betting on the time he'll return.

The sun is setting when he pulls in. I'm asleep and the Italian engine wakes me up. He gets out wearily. He moves with thoughtless exhaustion. Oh happy day.

The sky is a baby's blanket shade of pink and blue as the snug little cabin lights up. The boat sways like the others bobbing slightly in the pink tinged water. I slip off my clothes and stuff them in my bag. I stuff the bag into a trash bag and tie it tight. From the phone booth at the end of the lot I call to have my truck towed away. Then I take my bag and make sure no one is watching as I climb over the railing and get into the cold water.

For a long time I press my ear to the hull of the St. Vitus Dance. Is he just resting or has he taken a drink from the bottle? I don't know. Even the alligator is quiet. I tie my bag to ladder in the stern and lift myself cautiously up to the deck. I can't see him. Frightened, I get back into the water and wait longer, then I climb up the side to look into the window. He isn't in his bed. He is on the floor by the galley! I know he's taken the drink. Great!

The alligator is slumbering in the front of the boat. It appears to be clutching a baby blanket of all things. It raises its ugly head and snarls at my invasion, but it's chained to a bracket and can't come aft.

Fearless now I reach over the stern and untie my bag hoisting it aboard. I untie the ropes that hold the boat to the dock and start her engines. A true lady she pulls away from her prison with grace. I am quietly making my way to the blissful open sea, anxious about my sleeping beauty down below. As soon as I can, I tie off the wheel and go below.

He should be on the bed. He is heavier than he looks. He alarms me by rousing a little. Through drowsy green eyes he focuses on me with bleary drugged confusion, adorable! "Lieutenant Castillo?" he asks in that unique gravely voice. Then with a confused submissive plea, "Marty?" I freeze! Should I hit him, drive him back into unconsciousness? He passes out trying to clear his head.

His gun is in its holster. He carries handcuffs! Wow! I pull his shirt off and his cuffs to secure his wrists together through the sturdy headboard.

Up on deck again, I check the fuel level and the heading. I pilot the boat south-west. We'll never be found where we're going. I start thinking about that name he called me. Inspired I go down and cut up one of his black shirts to fashion a blind-fold.

Pilfering an excellent cognac from his liquor cabinet I fortify myself. I take the garbage bag off of my kit and check inside. The thrill comes up hard, swallowing all the fear that had been pounding in my temples. Nobody stopped us, nobody will. I've stolen the golden idol and now I'm a pirate on the high seas! I can see him from here. His naked chest almost hairless, his nipples small and tan. I can see his ribs rise with each breath through his perfect lips. The blindfold gives him a vulnerable quality. He won't see me. He won't know who I am. I can be anyone I want. Do anything to him and it will be in secret! I taste the fantasy with the fiery cognac of meeting him again on some future day, on a street somewhere. I would be polite and he would never know I'd ever touched him! Oh it's too wonderful an idea!

But now all I want is to unwrap my package.

He doesn't wear socks. The leather slippers pop from his rather small feet with ease. Classy little things, Italian like his car. He moans and shifts on the bed as I

unzip his pants and pull them off his hips. I tug them from the knees and the hems working them off his long golden legs. The label says Armanni. Well of course Armanni! Armanni or maybe Calvin Kline that's the look he was made for. His silk Y-fronts are molded to him. He is already a little aroused. I can feel my own passion to the roots of my hair.

This is a dream. A wildly wicked erotic dream. My delight flutters in my lungs and won't let me get a full breath. The sweetness of this. The power. The wonder of it is more than I'd hoped for. It's all been so perfectly simple, so complete. I feel like I'm drifting through it all, guided by kindly winds.

The smell of him is musky and tinged with smoke and the spice of his cologne. I kiss his smooth belly and it quivers and retracts, muscles roll beneath the softness. He softly moans in his sleep. He lifts his head, straining, and in his dreaming, asks, "Lieutenant, what?" But he is not really awake. I get off the bed and pour him a shot from the tainted bottle. He sips without hesitation. I don't need to drug him. I had planned to have him fully awake once I had him tied up, but I like the confusion in his voice. I like the way he yields to me. Maybe he yields because he was in the military. He must have been to call someone Lieutenant.

I cut the silk briefs with my knife, one slit up one side and down the other. It's easier than trying to pull them off. He is pale beneath them, pale like cream and his hair is soft and gold. His penis is blush-pink and silky. The perfect head gleams wetly like well-licked candy. Sweet. The first taste is salt and cognac. Instead of fighting me, he relaxes. Been here a thousand times haven't you? I smile at his instinctive confidence.

Gently I spread his legs and tie them wide apart. He doesn't like this even in his dreamy state. He arches his hips a little trying to lure me back. He has no idea what he's asking. A demon invites a demon onto the fiery playing field. I fetch my bag and pull out my toys. This is going to last and last, but at first I want this drowsy sweetness. I begin to tease his dreaming body. My mouth following my hands teaching and tormenting him with pleasure. He learns quickly and moans whenever I touch him. His penis jerks at the light brush of my fingers anxious for my lips. Good boy.

He is more than aroused now. He is coming to. His confusion is suffused with painful lust and yet even as I stroke him with my firm hand, even as I bend to take him in my mouth his gruff voice is demanding, "Who are you?" But his body has more urgent desires than his mind and uses all its power against these confused demands. They sound like love cries. They sound like pleas of penitent worshipers. Like a God I could answer but choose not to. Milky-white cum leaks through my fingers and splatters across his thighs. He is fully awake now and pulling at his bonds. Demanding and cursing he snarls and snaps with his savage words. Time for lesson number one.

When the electricity hits him he arches his back and yells in surprise. He shouts his challenge and I touch the prod to him again. This time I use my hand to press his lips. Hush. He twists and growls but doesn't say anymore. I know it won't last, but I'm happy that's true. I think, up until this moment, he thought this might be the kinky prank of a friend. He was enjoying himself; now his muscles stand out and his breathing is harsh with rage.

I leave him regretfully to check our course.

When I return I almost open up the wallet I find on the floor, but no, I don't want to know his name just yet. I like him the way he is, mine. I can name him anything I want. I climb onto the bed and pour more liquor into his protesting mouth. He swallows it in surprise. "Damn you. Who the hell are you?" he asks, as he goes under.

I turn him over and tie his legs again far apart. He really isn't going to like this. Wicked my skillful mind knowing that he will <u>feel</u> it so deeply and hate it so much all the while responding and responding as I know how to make him. Thinking twice I make a gag for him. He has a wonderful voice full of character and emotion, but I don't want to hear it rage at me.

For this I want him wide awake. I take a big flat strap from my pack, the leather is half and inch thick. I kneel on the bed and begin to spank those lovely rounded butt cheeks. They are pale and hard, but soon ruddy with rising blood beneath the skin. He comes awake with a roar, arching his back and raising his head. I stop for a long time, long enough to pet him and know that he is fully awake. Then I go back to it, knowing the indignity infuriates him, but there is no real pain. Like a wild thing he thrashes and I realize it isn't the spanking, it's his position that's alarming him, making him fight. He'll tear up his wrists and ankles this way. I almost tell him, but no, it wouldn't fit the plan to speak. Instead I take the prod and flip the switch right near his ear. He freezes and, furiously, he relaxes.

No he won't like this. His long, lean back is tanned and the straining muscles are magnificent. I stroke his hair and bury my nose in it. His corded arms are knotted with useless strain. The fine gold hairs on them shimmer like a dusting of glitter.

The probe is only an inch or so in diameter. Wet with jelly it glides easily into the anus, but not if you're fighting it with all you've got. My subject was doubly alarmed as I trailed it down his spine and pressed it to that vulnerable opening. For a tense moment he braced himself to thrash and then thought better of it. He was talking through the gag. I pressed the big artery in his left leg to feel his pulse. Racing. So he was scared and convinced of some horrible pain. Well the soft and plaint little dildo I pushed in him instead was both a relief and a terrible shock. It went in with my firm insistence and my holding the prod pressed firmly, though turned off, just above the opening. He groaned as if I was splitting him in two. I squeezed the bulb at the base of the dildo and filled him with chemical jelly. He felt the effects and his whole body became hard as stone. I removed the prod permitting him to arch and wiggle and thrash. A lovely, lovely sight.

I had so much more for him. This was just the beginning. It was thrilling to confirm my belief that he was new to this.

With the little dildo jutting from his reddened buttocks, I untied his gag. He coughed and breathed hard. "You're dead whoever you are, dead! Why are you doing this to me?"

I made sure the blindfold was still tight. Then I took hold of the dildo's protruding empty bulb and began to manipulate it round and round.

"Stop that!" But his voice has the edge of panic beneath the rage.

I felt beneath his straining body to confirm his helpless erection. I kissed his lovely rear, first one cheek than the other. I straddled his body so that the bulb could rub against my own needy body as I reached beneath him to fondle his hard cock. He tried to throw me off and that was lovely too. I didn't mean to satisfy him yet anyway.

I pulled out the little dildo, and pushed two fingers up him. He pulled his whole weight forward jerking the frame of the bed in his effort to get away from me. His ankles pulled at their restraints. He called me a perverting faggot and a coward. He shouted and ranted in desperate appeal but could not stop what was happening.

Still inside him with my two fingers, I reached with my other hand for my toys. He could hear it and the sound panicked him further. The feeling of his body was like a hot vice. The soft wet grip on my fingers was too tantalizing, but it would be better this way. The new device was much larger, my favorite. It would hurt him, but he was ready for it now. Still, he all but screamed as I forced it inside. He was so angry his body seemed to burn. His head was thrown back and his guttural cries never stopped. He even begged please.

I worked and worked him. I worked him till his body broke out in a fine sweat and his hips began to move as I directed. It spared him to work with me. I reached beneath him and stoked his weeping cock. He hated this particular lesson that the penetration could be pleasure. I undid his ankles and he quickly turned over. Immediately he paid the price of resting his full weight against the invading phallus. "Take it out," he asked quietly. Instead, I took his erection in my mouth.

He could have kicked me but he didn't. He could have tried some form of violent retaliation, but I had him in my mouth and he wisely did not chance it.

Now his cries were strangled and inarticulate. His head thrashed against his stretched arms. I was merciless and took my time. He tried to get it over as fast as possible pushing upward against me trying to race through the inevitable, but I would not allow it. I pinched the nerve that made him go slightly limp and then I sucked him up against his will. He was begging me to just get it over with.

In the end he had no control over what he was saying.

I silently urged him to turn over. He did not want to, but reluctantly complied. I think he hoped I would take the big phallus out. He cursed me as I tied his ankles. He almost fought, but missed his chance.

I went back to the upper deck with a cold beer. The night breeze off the ocean was warm and caressing. I loved and fed the sweet heavy pulse that was exactly like my captive's torment. Unlike him I had not had my release.

I made the corrections in course. The sky hinted pale colors in the east. I wasn't ready to give this up. Still, the way things were going... I fingered my knife. He may be the first to live through the night.

"Listen, Pal," my captive greeted me hoarsely. "I don't know what your sick game is, or why you're doing this. Why not enlighten me?" It may have come across better if he wasn't spread belly down on the bed with that big knob planted firmly between his cheeks. He was trying to get me to give him some clue to my identity. He was past thinking of escape and now fastening on revenge.

I gagged his protesting mouth. I pumped his round ass cheeks with the dildo. I spanked them with the strap. I took out the phallus and replaced it with ice cubes, two big fat ones from his own fridge. More jelly I squirted in him. I filled him till it leaked out thick and clear like resin from a tree. I shocked him with the probe and then I shoved a metal vibrator in him and turned it on. Thinking it was the prod he jumped and shouted.

My heart was like a marlin leaping on the end of a line. I was so powerfully charged with the struggle that I kissed and bit him leaving marks all over his body. His round, high butt cheeks, the inside of his strong thighs, the back of his neck. All the while his body shuddered and jerked. He came again helplessly, hopelessly against the smooth cover of his own bed.

I taught him he could not control how he felt or when. I turned him over and tied him again. His fine nipples were clamped with a woman's earrings. I took them off and sucked the tender nubs making them sore and hard. With my devices I tormented his cock, forcing him to be quiet while I had my way with it over and over.

I hurt him and I pleasured him. I made him scream with the extremes of both sensations until his voice was raw. He panted and thrashed, moving in ways he hated and I loved. He lifted his hips to my device raising his lovely ass in shameful supplication. Begging and cursing, whimpering and pleading he came more times this one night with me then I bet he ever did in any week of his hedonistic drug dealing life. He groaned with relief when he thought it was over. Grit his teeth and sobbed when he found it wasn't. Such lovely tears! Tears of exhaustion and humiliation, rage beyond containment. But I wasn't wrong about him. I uncovered his simmering volcanic passion and exploited it with salacious delight. He paid for his prurient nature with his pride and every last drop of lascivious capitulation I could wring from his golden body.

He lay back panting, moving his head from side to side in a soundless plea for mercy. At the end of his endurance, there wasn't an ounce of fight left. His weary petition was sincere. I took off his gag and this time he didn't try to speak. He was grateful just to breath easier. His cheeks were wet with lovely tears. I licked them away and kissed his perfect mouth. With a desperate little moan he kissed me. Tasting and testing my lips in an effort to know me, or maybe he was trying to deceive me with his golden tongue in the only way I'd allow him to use it. Clever, clever boy. I wouldn't let him steal away my resolve though his mouth was oh so very clever and his lips were strong almost savage after the first hesitant touches. The moment was inexpressible intimate. After a moment's heated struggle as if he were trying to convince me he would willingly participate if only I'd let him, he accepted my dominate kiss with a sigh returning it with artful lips, giving in. I kissed him long and hard commanding his mouth, owning it. Never was there a kiss like his, never. He couldn't control the natural talent that steamed from his lips and mouth. His voice was in his kiss and the smoky fire of the drugged whiskey. I could drown in the exquisite novelty. He kissed passionately despite his harnessed resentment.

Deeply satiated I pulled away. The little space of his bedroom was saturated with the scents of sweat and semen. His gleaming body lay stretched on the bed. His head was turned against his arm. The damp blindfold surrounded by spun-gold hair, his exhausted body utterly without a trace of resistance, he was mine. I fixed the image in my mind, while he waited submissively for my will. I was throbbing with lust. The pulse and the hunger were contained in my body as if my skin were wrapped around a trapped animal. I loved it, savored it. My sweat dripped down on his captive body. I trailed my fingers through it as I left him.

The sky was sweetly silver when I pulled the St. Vitus back to her resting place. Gulls wheeled overhead and larger boats chugged past us to ply there trade out in the deep.

I wanted him. Oh how I wanted him, but I loved this awful torment of taking him the way I had. Somehow this made it easier to leave him alive. This way I could come back and have him again. Yes, I could always do that.

I made him drink more whiskey. I made him drink so much of it that he was almost sick. He didn't fight me at all. He drank almost gratefully even knowing it was drugged.

I untied him. I put the cuffs back in their neat little case. I even covered his body.

I made sure I left nothing behind, no trace. Even if policemen came here and dusted for prints they would find nothing. I'm not wanted for anything.

The trashbag I put in my kit with everything else including the whiskey bottle. I slung it over my shoulder and sauntered up the dock. It was a long walk to the diner. Hot coffee and a Danish. I took a cab to the cruise ship docks and then another from there to home.



Two weeks later I see his car parked at the Gold Coast Trading company. I'm driving my other invisible vehicle a blue Honda Civic. I wait for him to come out. He is dressed all in cream, with a sky blue shirt. He is with his black friend.

I follow them to a restaurant and pull up alongside them in the parking lot.

I smile and say hello. He takes off his dark glasses. For a moment my heart stops. The strangest look comes over his face. Some say I look grim, my dark looks, my brooding stare. I'm told I can look formidable, cold. Maybe it is that and not recognition that causes him to look so startled.

His sudden smile is dazzling. He eyes my stylish short skirt, my long legs and high heels. "Hello," he says warmly. He turns to his partner. "See Rico things are definitely looking up," he turns to me, "like to have lunch?"

"Delighted," I answer.

"Name's Sonny," he offers as we head into the restaurant.

I take his hand. The thrill goes through me. Thinking fast I return his smile and say "Marty."

His friend laughs. "Your last name wouldn't be Castillo would it?"

"No."

Sonny glares at his friend. "Get your head examined partner."

"She sort of looks like him. Same dark hair, same eyes..."

"Stop," said Sonny rather harshly. "You'll give me nightmares."

And I will.



IMMORTALS

by

Deveroux Dane

There was a rustle of silk. Silk is silk in any century, one of those comforting constants. Tessa whispered tensely in his ear. "Duncan, someone is here!"

He came fully awake in the soft, amber-tinted darkness of the barge. "Did you hear something?" he whispered back. Concerned because he was the lightest of sleepers and heard nothing.

"No," she whispered clinging to him. "I just know someone is here." Her lovely French accent was hushed with genuine fear.

Duncan took her seriously, but his tone was light as he quipped. "Isn't that my line?" He concentrated but he did not feel the presence of an immortal. Still, there were thieves that could silent as moths in the night, Paris probably boasted more than her share, and the barge was full of antiques.

He moved soundlessly out of bed and reached for his sword. It felt like another hand grasping his, familiar, trusted, comforting. Like the wing of a bird it lifted in his hand. He could feel the quiver of the air against the metal.

With his vision adjusted to the darkness he could see Tessa's lovely white face. Like an ivory mask, she seemed carved in an attitude of apprehension. "Duncan," she whispered. "I have this strange feeling. Danger!" She shivered and wrapped the silk sheets around her nakedness.

Again he smiled and shook his head. "I know the feeling," he muttered. Still, he hadn't heard anything. He didn't feel what she felt.

"He's outside," she said. "Don't go out there!"

Now he felt grim. Whatever had frightened Tess would pay for it. He didn't mind killing a deserving mortal. He would cheerfully carve up a would be thief of assassin. He opened the door to the deck, feeling the familiar deck beneath his toes. He was always sure of his footing and he knew no one could know this old tub as he did. He went out on the deck with his sword at the ready. He kept his eyes closed to avoid the transition between darkness and the lights along the Seine.

He felt nothing, heard nothing, and yet never relaxed his stance. He had a sense that Tessa was right. He could not name why, but it was a strong feeling suddenly of being watched. A few feet in front of him just over his head he saw boots and a pair of legs. That was all his mind recognized, his body was slowed by the oddity of a man suspended in the air. But it was a man. A man in dark clothes descending like an angel on the softest wisp of air.

The snarling recognition hissed out of him like a curse, "You!" He flung up his sword and lunged. In an instant faster than his well trained and centuries well practiced reflexes could respond to his sword hilt was held as if wedged in an oak. "Nicholas de Brabant!" he growled, face to face with a demon in human flesh.

With surprising equamity the demon said, "Careful, Highlander. You'll put someone's eye out." He grinned. "Put it away. You're fast, Macleod, but nobody's that fast." He let go and to illustrate his point he moved fast as a blink out of range. "I've come to ask for help."

"Go to hell," Duncan spat. He kept his eyes trained on the vampire with savage intensity. The vampire remained unruffled. He looked for all the world like an innocent tourist. His hair was blond and curly and his eyes were a pleasant cerulean blue. He was dressed unobtrusively in dark slacks, midnight blue shirt, black tie and a black overcoat. Duncan looked more darkly forbidding and bizarre standing half naked with a Japanese sword in his hand and his long dark hair tumbling barbarically around his shoulders.

"You owe me," the vampire reminded him. He smiled and shrugged. "And it's Nick, Nick Knight now."

"After two centuries you've come to collect?" Duncan exclaimed skeptically. "Why don't I believe you? I know what you want."

"Really? And what would that be?" the vampire inquired with just a trace of bitterness.

"What your kind always want! I'm surprised it took you this long to find me!"

Nick shook his head. "I haven't drank human blood in years. I'm working as a homicide detective in Toronto."

Duncan laughed. "Right! And what, you came to me for a loan so you can finally get a sex change. Tell me another one!"

"Did I or did I not save your life?" Nick asked.

Duncan braced himself. "And did you or did you not deliver me to be an eternal

feast for your friends? Where are they by the way? Where is that monster you loved and respected, LaCroix? Where is that fiend Janette?"

"I saved you," Nick insisted.

Duncan gripped his sword in two hands and kept his back to the door below. "You fed me. You kept me alive so that your friends could kill me night after night draining me dry enough to stop my heart, chaining me to a bed in that god forsaken dungeon you called home. I'm supposed to thank you?"

Nick hung his head. "I took you out of there, remember. I made the other's think you were dead. Do you think it was easy to hide the fact that you were alive from LaCroix? It wasn't. They were addicted to you. They would have spent the rest of eternity searching for you or others of your kind. What do you think would have happened if they discovered you were not unique. As it was LaCroix had plans to breed you like cattle. Janette was sure you would be our salvation, our ticket to freedom from the constant killing."

"Do you know what she did to me?" he demanded.

The tumbling rush of time-fugue swept over Duncan in a backwash of memory. He was remembering the raucous ribald laughter of a dirty pub in seventeenth century Paris. The light on the wet cobblestones was amber from the smoke hazed windows and the air smelled of beer and rich red wine. He had a cut on his head and both hands sported bloody knuckles, but this was a familiar condition to any stout-hearted Scotsman. He knew he was poised on the brink of getting the life beat out of him, but this was familiar too. So he grinned, tasted blood on his bruised lips and faced his vicious adversaries.

"Give us our winnings and we'll leave you alone," one growled.

Duncan spat. "Give you my winnings is what you mean."

"Be reasonable, Highlander, we are six and you are one."

"You can count!" he observed sarcastically. "Good for you! Let's see if you can subtract as well!" He launched into them with every intention of killing as many as possible before they killed him. The happy blood-lust was dancing in his veins along with a copious amount of red wine. He didn't feel the pain.

He didn't feel the knife either, but he knew something was wrong. His legs failed him and his vision struggled through a heavy cloak of colors, going black as he hit the filthy stones. Dead again, damn it.

Alive again and staring into blue eyes that were surprised but not alarmed. He gasped as a firm hand helped him stand. "Your purse," said the helpful stranger. His curly blond hair was neatly combed around a pleasant face and his eyes had a sort of interested curiosity lighting them.

Duncan felt for the familiar sensation that always foretold another of his kind. This man was not an immortal. And yet there was an ugly stain of blood bubbling out from his fine satin shirt. He opened the cloth and yes the wound was beyond repair.

"God!" Duncan exclaimed and tried to staunch the wound with frantic hands.

The stranger frowned as if puzzled at his concern. "That little fellow is quick with a blade," he observed. Their positions abruptly reversed, Duncan found himself holding the dying man in his arms.

They were in a stable-yard. The hay was clean and sweet, though mired now with too much blood. "I'm so sorry," Duncan said as his benefactor died in his arms. He dragged himself away and passed out again.

When he came to, the blond man was standing up in the dim light. He had his shirt off and was attempting to wash out the blood stain. Very pale skin shone like fresh cream in the murky stable. His blond hair was the exact color of wheat straw and it rippled with lustrous waves.

"You're alive," Duncan said, bewildered. He rubbed his aching head, immortality providing no immunity to a hangover. His was monstrous and he ascribed his inability to perceive his companion's immortality to the wine. "I'm Duncan Macleod of the clan Macleod," he introduced himself as he struggled to stand. He was in no fear of having his head taken, as the stranger could have done that at anytime.

"Nicholas Brabant," said the blond man. He studied Duncan as if the darkness where as bright as day. He cocked his head and then shook it. "I thought you were one of us, but you can't be, despite the fact that you live."

Duncan shrugged. "I can't sense you either," he said.

At this Nicholas scowled. "What do you mean sense?"

"You are different aren't you?" Duncan observed.

His companion laughed. "I was about to say the same of you!"

"Come on," he offered hefting his purse. "I'll buy you a drink." He thought better of it and amended, "or better still, breakfast."

This caused a strange reaction in Brabant who stepped back with a curious distaste. "I think not. I've already... eaten." He looked up at the pale smoky sky and muttered. "Besides I think it's time I went home."

"Suit yourself," Duncan said. He was a little offended but after all the man had probably saved him more than just a purse.

"Why not come with me?" Nicholas offered. "I have some people who would love to meet you."

"People like us?" Duncan wondered.

Nicholas smiled strangely. "Like me," he said.

It was a forbidding, thick walled fortress Nicholas invited him into. Duncan didn't care for its chilly inhospitable interior. It looked ancient and deserted. In one of the

smaller rooms a fire blazed. In front of it sat one of the most gorgeous women Duncan ever laid eyes on. Her hair was black as a raven's wing, it hung to her waist gleaming blue-black with rainbow shimmers. Her eyes were blue like a summer sky and her lips were as red as holly berries. Strangely luminescent skin gave her the perfection of porcelain. She smiled as she rose from her chair. Her filmy robes of white gauze draped around her in a style he'd never seen before. Her tiny waist was belted in with chains of gold and glittering gem stones. With a warm smile she welcomed them. "Why, Nikolai. What have you brought me?"

"Not for you, Janette," Nicholas said with a kiss. "His name is Duncan Macleod and he is a man of fascinating abilities."

Janette reappraised her guest with a lascivious sweetness. "Oh?" she purred.

Duncan went to her and kissed her hand. It was cold as stone, but her eyes had a lovely banked-fire intensity that warmed his chilled bones. He was lost in that sapphire heat. And he knew by her smile that they would be lovers.

"Where is LaCroix?" Nicholas demanded.

Janette seemed startled. "LaCroix? How should I know. He went out to look for you I suppose. It's almost sunrise, he won't be back till tomorrow evening. You know how he is, when he finds someone... interesting."

"Duncan, would you like a place to sleep?" Nicholas offered.

Janette took their guest's hand. "I'll show him," she offered.

"Janette, I don't think it would be a good idea," Nicholas protested.

Duncan laughed. "I think it's a wonderful idea!" he said. He dismissed all further protests and let this gorgeous creature take him down a dark corridor to a room deep below the main floor. "How can you see?" he asked as he groped along beside her.

Her soft contralto assured him, "I have the eyes of a cat." She laughed softly. The room she led him to was gold and cream, glowing with the light of a merry fire and decorated like a plunder's dream. Piles of riches and swaths of expensive fabrics tumbled in profusion under a collection of thick candles. All he really cared about was the huge elaborate bed and the graceful seductive movements of his guide's hidden limbs. She locked the door and barred it. "To prevent intrusion. I may have a jealous lover," she warned.

Duncan's heart was tripping fast. "You can add one more," he vowed.

Her lips were cool like winter wine. Her skin was as smooth as glass, but she was willing and passionate as he took her clothing off. The soft curves of her limbs were without flaw. And her hands were as skilled as the most cunning prostitute. He was more than half in love with her beauty alone. There was an instant of alarm as she revealed the extent of her strength. A sharp pain as her teeth plunged into his neck and then... He was sliding, slipping as he was rocked in the arms of his deadly lover. He knew the sensations no mortal could so instantly recognize. Death folding over him. Death shutting out the light. Death smothering all but a passionate sigh.

He woke and got dressed. The vampire stirred but did not wake. Terror was humming in his veins and electrifying his brain. He did not remember ever feeling this afraid except the first time he died. He unlocked the door and stumbled down the black corridor. He could see the light ahead in the room where the fire still smoldered in the cavernous fireplace. He could see from the high windows that the sun was setting. He'd slept through the day in the arms of the succubus.

Thin hands caught him, spun him around. Her hair was wild and her eyes were wide. She was on him in an instant. Her power was inhuman, her grip stronger than any man's. She was gasping some exclamation just before she fastened on his neck like a lioness and pulled him to the floor in front of the hearth.

"Janette!" roared a man's voice. Duncan swooned in her arms and tried to struggle.

"Nikolai!" she replied in a drunken satiated voice. "I've discovered the most amazing thing! This man does not die!"

"Let him go!" Nicholas commanded.

"You don't understand," she explained dreamily. "I've killed him. I've drained him, and he didn't die. Try it," she offered as if offering a delectable sweet.

Nicholas pulled her away and pressed his hand over Duncan's bleeding throat. Through a haze, Duncan could see the beautiful woman staring down. Her chin and the whole front of her white gown was red with gore. His blood... A terrible fear clenched his heart. What would it mean to be held captive by such monsters? To be an immortal source of food for immortal demons?

His erst-while savior was holding him firmly. "We have to get him out of here before LaCroix discovers him. What was I thinking?" He berated himself.

"You are what she is," Duncan accused. He tried to struggle but his healing abilities were still responding slowly, replenishing his blood.

Janette laughed. "LaCroix will be so delighted!" she said. "Oh, Nikolai do you realize what this means. What you're always talking about, what you're always dreaming of! An end to the killing, the endless hunting. A lover and prey all in one!" She threw back her lovely head and laughed.

Nicholas looked horrified. "And endless imprisonment for this man? No, I never dreamed of such a horror. Think, Janette! What would it be like for him?"

Undaunted she knelt down beside them and took Nicholas's arm. "He would be like the milk cow, mortals enslave for their needs."

"He's a man!" Nicholas protested throwing off her arm.

Another voice said amiably. "And a handsome one too. What have we here?" An ugly man with bizarre albino coloring and a malevolent expression leaned over them. He picked Duncan's wrist up, checked his pulse and said with regret, "handsome and dead, or near enough. Really, Janette this is too much," he admonished the

bloodstained woman with gentle mockery.

She tore her eyes away from Nicholas' pleading ones. "Our darling Nikolai has brought us the most wonderful creature, LaCroix. An immortal man."

The white head flung up to stare at her. "What did you say?" he demanded sharply.

"He's immortal," Janette insisted.

LaCroix smiled with malevolent disbelief. "Poor man," he said pityingly. "We shall see," he pushed away Nicholas' protesting hand and pulled Duncan into a deadly embrace.

"For the love of God!" Duncan cried, but no benevolent deity interceded on his behalf.

When he woke it was in a tower room. Through a narrow slit of window in the massive stones a cold wind whistled and moaned bringing a bitter chill. Duncan sat up and discovered he was manacled by one ankle to a chain bolted to the wall. There was only the bed he way lying on for furniture. The only light was the waning evening colors filtering in through the window with the chill.

He wore only his breeches. There were no blankets. The straw mattress stank of mold. All in all a miserable situation exacerbated by a terrible thirst, and a belly that ached from days of hunger. When had he eaten last? The tavern where he'd won his purse of silver and met up with those six ruffians? He couldn't remember anything but drinking too much. Since then he'd died three times.

He was ravenous. Wondering bleakly if an immortal could die of hunger and thirst, but he'd been in situations that had caused him to wonder this before. He'd even gone longer without food or water, but never after being drained of blood at least twice. Weakness defined his world and all he could do was curl up on the stinking mattress like a wounded animal.

The door opened and the fiend Nicholas Brabant came into the icy room. The first words out of his mouth were, "I'm sorry, Duncan."

"Go to hell," he replied, but the curse had no strength. He could hardly speak past the chattering of his teeth and the cramping in his belly. His lips were cracked and his parched mouth treated his tongue like a stranger.

"What can I do for you?" asked the vampire.

Duncan managed a pathetic laugh. "You can set me free for a start."

"I want to," Nicholas admitted. "I really do, but it wouldn't do any good. You'd never get by the others."

Janette walked in and leaned against Nicholas. "What's the matter with him?" she inquired.

"He's cold," surmised Nicholas. "And hungry I suspect."

She stretched. "Mmmm so am I."

"No," the tall vampire stopped her. "First you have to feed him, and get him some warm clothes and blankets. Something to drink too."

She growled warningly like a cat with a mouse, but Nicholas' snarl was deeper and even more insistent. "Now, Janette," he commanded. She left languidly. He came to stand by the bed. "It's been a long time since any of us really had to think about mortal concerns, like food and keeping warm. I didn't want them to lock you up here, but there was nothing I could do." He took off his long cape and draped it over Duncan.

"You brought me here!" Duncan accused.

"I shouldn't have, but I was curious. I didn't think about what it would mean."

Duncan sat up and pulled the cloak around him. "I've been alive a hundred years and the only thing I ever feared really was being imprisoned and found out. I was thinking of what mortals would do," he said sardonically. "I haven't believed in monsters since I was a child."

"I've been around a lot longer than a hundred years and I've never run into someone like you. I thought you might be one of us," the vampire confessed.

"Easy enough mistake to make. I thought you were one of my kind," he said. At this the vampire came alert.

"There are more of you?" he asked intently.

Suspicious of his sudden interest Duncan was cautious. "Why do you ask?"

Nicholas bent down and said in a hushed voice. "No matter what happens, you must never tell Janette or LaCroix! If I manage to get you free, we must make it seem that you are dead. Or they would never stop searching for you. If they learned they're are others of your kind they would search them out and force them to suffer the fate they plan for you."

"They would treat us like cattle!" Duncan agreed. His head dropped. "As if our own eternal battles were not enough to worry us. We must contend with mortals and now this!" Whether it was delirium or what he didn't know but he found himself explaining to the vampire all about the immortals. How he could only die if his head was taken and how if that feat was accomplished by one of his own kind they would receive all his knowledge and power. "I don't know why we were made. I ask the same questions as any mortal man," he said wearily. "Why am I here? Why was my kind made? I get no more answers than mortals do. I know I was not put on this earth to be the immortal food for vampires!" he finished, darkly.

Nicholas snorted. "You'll never prove that to LaCroix. He talks even now of breeding you like a bull."

This provoked a bitter smile. "That plan will fail," Duncan said. "I never thought

I'd be glad that I cannot sire children, but now I am."

"Then how are more of you made?" Nicholas pondered.

"We become immortal only after we die. I don't know how it is decided. I've never met anyone who knows."

Nicholas frowned thoughtfully. "Strange," he said. "Very strange." He walked to the iron bolt that held the chain and easily pulled it from the wall. "Come," he said holding out his hand.

"Why should I trust you?" Duncan asked.

Nicholas shrugged. "Then stay and die again. LaCroix is coming for you soon."

Duncan took his cold hand. "Where?" he asked.

Nicholas nodded to the window. "Out there."

The window was a sheer drop to the castle walls below. "You're mad!" Duncan exclaimed.

"Hold onto me," the vampire instructed. He put his arms around Duncan's half naked body and leapt out the window.

Duncan clung to the demon in speechless amazement as the streets of Paris appeared below them like a maze of lights, movement and shadows. "I cannot take you far," Nicholas said as if they were walking along the boulevard instead of high above it. "You must leave the city. And Duncan," he warned. "I can't lie to LaCroix. I can't keep my thoughts from him. For him to believe I killed you, I must do it. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" Duncan agreed. "Just don't do it by dropping me!" It amazed him that though they were of equal size, the vampire carried him through the air with ease.

The vampire laughed and headed for a rooftop on the outskirt of town. "I'll try to come up with something LaCroix will believe," he said. "Perhaps, we'll meet again Duncan Macleod of the clan Macleod."

Duncan staggered as his feet hit a solid surface. "I hope not, but if we ever do. I swear I won't be taken as easily. I'll kill you if I can, Vampire." He was still hanging onto Nicholas' shirt when the vampire tore from his grasp like a flag in a high wind.

"Until then, Highlander," said a voice from the dark.

Duncan spun around and stared up at the sky, but there was nothing but moonlight and clouds. He collapsed on the rooftop. If it weren't for the cloak still wrapped around his shoulders he could easily convince himself it was all a nightmare.

In the present he was standing on the steady deck of his barge staring at a face that like his own had not aged with the passing centuries. He held his sword in a light but firm grip, prepared to keep his word.

Nick looked away. "I understand if you can't forgive me. All I can say is I've tried to make up for all I've done to humanity by serving it the best way I can. I've been a field surgeon and a teacher, now a cop. I'm not defending the way I was in those days. I was a monster. LaCroix, Janette and I roamed the world as creatures of the night. I was possessed of the idea that being a monster forced me into acts of irredeemable evil, of killing. It sickened me, revolted me, finally I could take it no longer and I tried to break away of the horror, the endless death. LaCroix spent the years hunting me, trying to bring me back into his influence. Finally he caught me. I had to kill him."

"No great loss," Duncan said darkly.

"No," Nick agreed. "You have to understand that when you knew me, I was still very much in his thrall. I broke free. I never told him about you. I knew where you were. I saw you several times over the years and I knew some of the same people."

"Your point being that you could have come for me at any time," he guessed. "So what brings you here now?"

"I told you. I need your help. It isn't for me," he explained softly. "She's human and she's in trouble. Look, I know how you feel about me. But Nat--" his voice choked with real emotion. "Natalie, she isn't your enemy. She's a good, honest, unique person."

The sword lowered. "What kind of trouble?" he asked.

"She's been kidnapped. I think by one of your kind. I'm sure he's immortal and not like me. Someone who can operate over centuries and in the daylight. Someone who can disappear for years and resurface to kill again and again. And always someone close to one of my kind. He calls himself a vampire hunter."

"Good for him," Duncan snarled.

Nick snapped. "Don't let your hatred of us extend to Natalie. Whatever you think we deserve, she shouldn't have to suffer!" His voice had gone rough with a deep growling power. His eyes glowed with hell-fire.

"Alright," he agreed. "Alright. I'll listen to what you have to say."

"That's all I ask." Nick took something out of his pocket and held in out.

It turned out to be a photograph of a young woman. Her hair was thick and wavy. Her blue eyes were large and intelligent. She reminded Duncan of a cocker spaniel.

"Natalie," said the vampire. "She's a very special person. She's a forensic pathologist for the police department in Toronto."

"Does she know about you?" Duncan asked.

Nick nodded. With an enigmatic smile he said, "she unzipped the body bag I came in. I caught a pipe bomb," he explained. "She wasn't afraid of what I was. She was

fascinated. She's convinced she can bring me over to mortality."

"How?" Duncan asked.

Nick laughed. "Chicken soup," he quipped. "She's convinced it's the blood that keeps me from coming over. I haven't drank human blood since the day we met. I joined the police department, homicide. I've been there a couple of years now."

It suddenly occurred to Duncan that Nick looked haggard, worn. He even had shadow on his chin and there were circles under his eyes. "How long have you been looking?" he asked.

"Three weeks," the vampire said hollowly. "It's like she's dropped off the face of the earth! I've tried to bring in Interpol, but what can I say? I've got proof the killer is immortal? I'm a vampire you see and I've lost friends to this guy?" he said derisively. "The problem is I can't search during the day. I need a safe place to rest. He knows all my weaknesses and he'll use them against me. I don't really care what happens to me. I'd give myself up for her if he'd let me."

"Do you love her?" he asked.

Nick looked startled. "She's a friend," he said defensively. "It's my fault she's in trouble." He handed over another photo. "This is the man." The photo was old, easily fifty years. The man was dark and swarthy, powerful looking, he had a penetrating gaze.

"I don't know him," Duncan said.

Nick sighed. "I hoped you might. I hoped, well I guess I'm grasping at straws at this point." He looked up nervously. "I need a place..." he said.

Duncan stood rock still. "I have people here, people I care about."

"I won't harm them. I swear it," Nick promised.

"I believe you. I must be insane, but I do. One thing. One thing you have to promise me." He gestured below. "They can't know. You have to swear you won't let them know."

"About you?" Nicholas asked.

"No, about you. They know I'm immortal. Let them think the same of you, but don't tell them you're a--"

"Vampire? Fiend of the night?" he quipped bitterly.

"Yeah," Duncan said. "Swear it."

"Easily. The fewer who know, the better. We have laws about revealing ourselves to mortals. That's part of the reason I haven't asked my own kind for help."

Duncan shook his head. "I managed to convince myself that you were a nightmare."

"Yeah, well consider this a wakeup call," Nick muttered. "I can see this was a bad idea. I'll go..." he offered.

Against his better judgment, Duncan stopped him. "I said I'd help. I owe you one, sort of." He scowled. "I'm not forgetting the fact that you took me to that hell-hole in the first place, but you did get me out." He put his hand on the door to the barge's interior but hesitated opening it.

"There's a woman in there," Nick said calmly.

Duncan didn't look at the vampire. He kept his eyes trained on his own hand on the hatch handle. "If you break your word. If you hurt her... or the boy," he said tightly.

Nick sighed. "I swear I wouldn't, even if I didn't need your help."

Duncan nodded, but his insides were cold and full of a nameless dread. He only opened the door because his instincts trusted Nick, and something about his fear told him it had less to do with the vampire and more to do with himself. He didn't know just yet what he felt within his heart, only that it was dark and shameful and his conscience shied away from it.

Tessa was wearing a cream-colored satin robe. Her gold hair tumbled over her shoulder's like spun gold. Her eyes were wide, tinged with fear and very blue. "Duncan?" she questioned. Her voice had a slight tremor and she looked a little pale.

"Tessa, meet an old friend of mine. This is Nick. Nick Knight. He's a cop from Toronto."

"An old friend?" she repeated meaningfully. She did not come forward with her usual graciousness.

Duncan went to her side still holding his sword. "Old," he answered. He kissed her lightly. "Nick is going to be staying with us for a little while."

"Oh?" she commented. She made a brave recovery and offered the couch, testifying to its comfort.

Duncan noted the way Nick was edging away from the small round windows. A pale rosy light was bouncing of the Seine and filling every port-hole with light. "The store room," he said suddenly and began leading the vampire through the barge to the stern.

"The storeroom?" Tessa protested. "But Mac it's so dark. There's no bed. It's not set up for a guest."

Nick smiled. "It will be fine. Duncan knows I suffer from an extreme reaction to sunlight. I like to spend the day sleeping."

"Reaction?" she said in confusion. "I didn't think immortals were effected by allergies and sicknesses."

"I'm an exception," Nick explained. He wove his way after Duncan through the costly furnishings and a collection of Tessa's sculptures. "Wow, these are great," he paused and admired the sculptures of stone and iron.

"Thank you," she replied. "They're mine."

"Really?" he said genuinely impressed. "Fantastic."

"Nick!" Duncan prompted. He had kicked open the store room. It was filled with cans of barge paint, old brushes and spare ropes. He held out an arm load of blankets. "Make yourself comfy," he offered with a false smile. "I'll see you're not disturbed."

Nick smiled self-consciously. "Thanks," he said. His blue eyes were haunted and pale. "I'm sorry to have bothered you at all. I just--"

"It's alright," Duncan assured him. For the first time he dropped his guard. "Things change," he said lightly. "Who should know more about that then us?"

Nick's weary face lit up with a wry smile. He nodded. "See you this evening," he said. He took the blankets and went into the narrow dark room. He shut the door behind him. Duncan took out his key and locked it.

"What are you doing?" Tessa whispered.

Duncan pulled her with him away from the door. "Tessa, Nick isn't what he seems." He put he arms around her. "He's dangerous."

"You mean he's insane?" she gasped. "We've got a madman locked in our storeroom?"

He hesitated. "He's not insane. Just... I don't want you alone with him. And," he warned, "don't get too close, and don't ever, ever go in that room during the day. He's not someone you'd want to startle."

Her blue eyes were stormy with worry. "Duncan, I don't like this. What about what he said. Is it possible for an immortal to have an allergic reaction to the sun?"

He snorted derisively. "Of course not, but he believes it. It's a paranoia brought on by guilt. He isn't the first of us to impose irrational limits on himself." It was convincing. He could tell by the sudden softening of her features.

"Poor man. I could feel something different about him. You know I was afraid, until I looked in his eyes. I can't tell you why I was so frightened, but it was very powerful almost instinctive, like being afraid of a wolf or a lion. But... his eyes. There is something so sad, so haunted. He wants your help, doesn't he?"

He kissed her. "Is it any wonder I love you?" he said softly. "And yes, he wants my help. A friend of his was kidnapped. He thinks by one of my--our kind."

"Is his friend an immortal?" she asked.

Duncan shook his head. Part of his incredulous feeling came through his explanation when he said, "No. Actually she's a forensic pathologist from the Toronto police department." It wasn't the missing woman's profession that caught him off guard, well maybe a little... No, it was Nick the vampire cop, something about it just felt too bizarre not be at least mildly amusing. "Life is strange," he muttered with a chuckle. There was something fitting about a woman who worked with the dead having a relationship with one of the undead. Tessa was staring with a look of impatient confusion. "I'm sorry, Sweetheart," he apologized. "There's not a lot I can tell you."

"I don't care what you say. I can tell you were never friends. Why are you helping him?"

"Good question," he answered. "I guess because I owe him a favor, and this woman, whoever she is, needs help."

She was smiling. "That's what I love about you. You drop everything to help a perfect stranger, even if she's the friend of a man you don't like. I'd say you were crazy, but there's something about him that makes me want to help."

Duncan cast a look behind him at the locked store room door. His smile faded to a worried frown. He didn't like Tessa's interest in Nick. It wasn't just jealousy, there was this unnamed dread haunting him. Something to do with Nick and Tessa....

Tessa yawned and went to the galley. "There's something strange about having a house guest locked in our storeroom," she complained. She heated water for the coffee press. "What will he do when he finds out you locked him in?"

Duncan was thinking more on the lines of the lock kept everyone else out and for that Nick would be grateful. "I want you to promise you won't open that door, Tessa," he insisted.

She crossed her heart. "I swear!" she protested. "All I said was it's strange...."

"I think I'll go talk to Darius," he said.

She brightened. "I'll come with you!"

He shook his head. "I need you to stay here and explain things to Richie when he wakes up. I don't want Nick to have any unpleasant surprises." But thinking about it, he realized he had the vampire completely at his mercy at this moment. Nick must have been absolutely desperate to trust him like this.

Duncan took a shower and dressed quickly. He gulped the strong coffee and watched as Tessa began setting up a block of clay. He loved watching her work, but this morning there was no time. "Tell Richie to stay close," he advised. He kissed her goodbye.

The streets of Paris were gray and wet. The old avenues were bleak in the early hours, but the rich, delightful scent of fresh baked bread permeated the air along the row of tiny restaurants. He bought some baguettes and cheese and some sweet rolls to share with Darius. Darius knew of his encounter with the vampires. The ancient,

wise immortal had known LaCroix long before Duncan. It was Darius who convinced a credulous young immortal that vampires where not demonic, magical beings; but rather creatures like themselves a race outside mortal parameters of normality perhaps, but not necessarily evil.
Darius laughed and explained that men like LaCroix, human or immortal enjoyed perpetuating their own myth. LaCroix reveled in his dark nature. Darius expressed pity for men like Nicholas Brabant who were lured into LaCroix's influence.

Duncan thought about all of this as he approached the church. He knew he should confront this nagging feeling that shadowed him, but he was reluctant. Darius would drag it into the light with his usual gentle insight. Duncan wasn't sure he wanted that.

Darius was waiting for him. That was the advantage of being able to sense another immortal's presence. He held out a large mug. At Duncan's suspicious glare he laughed. "It's coffee!" He swore. "Brazilian, with orange rind and cinnamon."

It was wonderful. Thick and dark with the oily sheen of the finest French roast and a subtle hint of chocolate. He handed his old friend the bakery treats and retrieved a sweet roll. He felt at home in the small stone room. It was often chilly and smelled slightly musty from the old books that weighed down the shelves, but all these things were familiar to his senses being everyday things from the past. He didn't like to admit it but the old buildings and antiquated nuisances that when with them gave a deep sense of comfort. He also had to admit that a part of him loved being younger than someone else. He liked the fact that to Darius he was still in many ways a child, a novice anyway.

"Something is troubling you," Darius observed, ready as always to put everything aside to address a friend's troubles.

"Nicholas Brabant paid me a visit," Duncan said.

Darius drew back but his eyes sparked with lively curiosity. "Really?" he said. "I heard he was working in Toronto."

"You knew?" Duncan exclaimed.

The monk shrugged modestly. "Keeping up with immortals is a hobby. Before you protest, let me tell you that this one is not like the others of his kind. He has done a lot of good in his long life. I would say he is trying for reconciliation if he were mortal, but the church will never absolve one of his kind."

Duncan sipped his coffee. "He's looking for a friend who's been kidnapped. He thinks it was an immortal." He brought out the pictures of Natalie and the old one of the suspect.

"Flambeau," Darius said softly. "I thought he was dead."

"You know him?" Duncan leaned forward eagerly.

Darius seemed very troubled. His eyes had gone dark and stormy. His body was tense. It was easy at that moment to see the warrior he was. "Etienne Flambeau, yes I know him. I know him quite well. A very troubled soul, my friend. A very

dangerous man. Every aspect I persuaded you to abandon when thinking of Nicholas, I urge you to adopt when thinking of Etienne." He sighed deeply. "I hope that he truly is dead," he sincerely wished as he studied the photo of the young woman. "It would be too terrible to believe he had his hands on another woman." Very bleak, his eyes seemed as he looked up from the picture. "Oh, Duncan my friend, be very careful. Flambeau was one of the church's inquisitors in those less enlightened centuries when such men flourished. He acquired a taste for power and pain in his quest to rid the world of evil. He feels it is his mission, in fact the mission of all immortals," he confided heavily. "He was a monk in one of the oldest orders long before he was immortal, but I'm afraid his beliefs have very little to do with sanctity."

"He's mad," Duncan guessed.

Darius nodded. "Absolutely. He has dedicated his immortality to the destruction of vampires, witches and the like. He has done incalculable evil in his madness, including torture of innocents."

Duncan resolved right then and there to do all he could to stop this madman.

Darius covered his hand with his own strong smooth one. "I don't need a window to see into your heart. You are going after him."

Duncan didn't smile. "The Gathering is here anyway. He'll come for us eventually, unless one of our kind takes his head."

"It's never that easy. You should know that by now," Darius admonished.

Duncan stood up. "The time for choices is passing us by, old friend. You know it."

Darius stood too. "You know," he said with soft amusement. "I never really believed in the Gathering, but you are right. The time is coming when even my sanctuary will not hold it out."

Duncan embraced him affectionately. "Not if I have anything to say about it," he swore.

"If the legend is true, we may not get such a choice," he cautioned. "There can be only one."

"Then I chose you," Duncan replied. His tone was light, but his meaning was serious.

Tenderly, Darius kissed him on the cheek. "Go in peace," he blessed, but they both knew peace was unlikely for either of them for long. The Gathering had that kind of intensity, like the smell of war.

Duncan felt that old thrill. Darius and he had once been lovers a century ago in this same city. The memory had the crisp untrammeled clarity of youth. The wild young days when the intensity of his passion was fired by his intellect. He had hungered for knowledge like a peasant for bread. He fell deeply in love with Darius. The idea of him and all his ideals. He had been the hot-blooded student lusting after concepts and theology and the great vaults of wisdom that Darius represented. He wanted

wisdom, and serenity, an end to the endless fighting and heart-ache. And there was Darius with his strong arms out stretched offering sanctuary for a world-weary immortal.

At the time, Duncan remembered fondly, he thought himself wise and studious. The memory of seducing immortal Darius was anything but studious. It was... it was like the monk's famous mead, sweet and heady, robust with masculine vitality and graceful like a woman's finesse. Homosexuality was in fashion at the time, and his stern Highlander upbringing was both appalled and intrigued. The sinful unknown joyfully celebrated by a very knowledgeable monk and his student. They never spoke about those days, but Duncan had no regrets. Only sometimes he saw a fleeting glimmer of that old passion in his friend and wondered how Darius felt. Duncan knew it had pained the monk deeply when he left. There was no other choice. He couldn't live the monastic life and knew his influence would destroy the rare serenity the ancient warrior had fashioned for himself.

He promised to contact Darius if he found Flambeau.

"Do you think," asked Darius hopefully, "that you could persuade Nick to come?"

Duncan scoffed. "I doubt it. I'll ask him. Maybe what they say about vampire's and the church is just another myth."

Darius shook his head regretfully. "I'm afraid it's true. I have seen the cross burn a vampire's flesh like acid." He looked grim. "Flambeau showed me."

[illegible]

When he got back to the barge he found Tessa sitting in the weak sunlight watching the river traffic. He told her what Darius had said.

"He sounds like a monster," she commented. "He really believes in vampires? Think of the innocent men and women who have suffered for his delusion!"

Guilt twisted in his guts like a live thing. Duncan knew he should tell her the truth about Nick, but that feeling of foreboding made him hesitate. Why, he wondered, did he feel so ashamed, and so desperate to keep Tessa and Nick apart? He didn't really feel that the vampire would harm her. No, it wasn't that, it was something that made him feel a sense of...excitement mixed with dread, like a shameful desire he was desperate to subdue.

"Mac, what is it? What's wrong?" Tessa demanded. Her blue eyes were full of alarm and her face was pale.

"I don't know," he lied. He did know. The revelation swept over him with horrific power, sweeping his soul up in a black tide of loathing and painful truth. He wanted something too terrible, too unspeakable. He had to get the vampire out of their lives before the temptation became too strong to resist. Even now his shameful longing

was like a forbidden lust pulling at his heart.

The wide clear eyes of his true love were staring with love and concern. She was reaching out to hold him. Duncan gathered Tessa into his arms and declared softly from the depths of his four-hundred year old soul, "I love you so much."

"Duncan," she replied, frightened. "You can tell me. Whatever it is, you can tell me!"

"No," he murmured into her soft golden hair. "I can't."

"I've never seen you like this!" she whispered, holding him tightly. She didn't insist that he share whatever he was holding back.

Duncan returned her embrace reasurringly. "Where's Richie?" he asked.

"He said he had something to pick-up at Henri's shop. He promised to be back before sunset." She leaned back to look into her lover's eyes. She smiled teasingly. "Etienne Flambeau isn't the only one who believes your friend is a vampire..."

□□□□

The sun set in a milky haze turning the Seine into liquid silver, before the evening lights began to reflect on the ancient waterway. Duncan unlocked the storeroom.

He made a fire in the barge's elegant fireplace and sat with Tessa before the rich golden glow. She was brushing his hair with her silver boar-bristled hair brush. The gentle motions of her firm artist's hands were sending shivers of delight down his back. He loved this intimacy, this sensation. The warmth of the fire and the relaxing strokes of the brush carried him back on the liquid current of time. The tingle reminded him of making love to Darius and the Quickening two immortals could share while making love. Darius taught him that, taught him the could pass their power back and forth in little electric pulses immortal bliss. The snapping fire of passionate self would transmit through their connected bodies making them cry out with the force of uncontainable energies and surges of a pleasure beyond all other experiences. The ethereal sound of monks singing in prayer would drift through the ancient Abbey, wrap around their sweating bodies like ghosts and sail away like their conscious constraints. Such ecstasy Duncan would never know with a mortal, even one he loved so completely as he did Tessa. Sometimes the memory would tantalize his mind, but it was not the shameful longing that poisoned his thoughts.

"When, will he come out of there?" Tessa whispered in his ear.

A voice answered from the dark corner of the room where Tessa's sculptures crouched, "I am awake, thank you."

Every muscle in Duncan's body tensed. Tessa could not have failed to notice. She tensed too, but kept one hand on his shoulder. Tessa never tried to restrain him from

a fight, she had too much faith in his judgment. Duncan covered her hand with his. "How long have you been there?" he inquired tersely.

"Long enough to grow jealous," Nick replied lightly.

Duncan got up slowly and picked up his wine glass. "Let's take this outside," he offered with the barest pretense of civility. He picked up his coat from the rack that also held his sword. His hand brushed the ivory hilt, but didn't grasp it. He left it in the rack and shrugged into the heavy winter coat. He didn't look back to see if Nick was following. it unnerved him that he didn't hear the vampire open the storeroom door or inter the room.

In the steady light of the riverbank lamps Nick's face was affable and pale. "Thanks," he muttered, shoving his hands into the recesses of his coat.

"For what?" Duncan asked. "Not killing you in your sleep?"

Nick looked away. "I guess," he said. "Macleod, I would really like to prove I'm not what you think. I'd like to make up for what happened between us, but the truth is, right now, all I'm concerned with is Natalie."

Duncan relaxed a little. Now that he knew the source of his fears came from his own needs and not the vampire's he could be more forgiving. "I understand," he said. "Truce?"

"Gladly," Nick answered taking Duncan's offered hand.

The vampire's hand was cool, but the grip was human, firm and brief. "The man we're looking for is Etienne Flambeau," he said. "You were right, he is an immortal. He's a fanatic vampire hunter from the old Inquisition witch trials."

"How did you find all this out?" Nick eagerly inquired.

"I have a friend who knew him well," Duncan replied cryptically.

Nick looked at him closely. "The monk, Darius," he guessed. "Yes, I know of him." Nick smiled. "Don't look so surprised. Remember I'm twice your age."

"He wants to meet you," he said quietly.

Nick looked uncomfortable. "I don't think that's likely," he said. There was a bitter quality to his voice and the shift of his eyes.

Duncan felt a twinge of sympathy, but he said, "That's what I told him."

Nick gave a wry little laugh. Suddenly his eyes softened and darkened. "If Flambeau's harmed Natalie..."

Duncan nodded. "I know how you feel, but relax there's no reason he should. She's bait to lure you in. We will get her out of there. Just leave Flambeau to me," he said grimly.

"We?" Nick repeated.

Duncan shrugged. "Like I said, I know how you feel."

Nick looked past him to the golden glow of the barge's windows. "She's a beautiful, talented woman," he said enviously.

Duncan tensed. "Yes she is."

"I envy you," the vampire admitted. "I told you Nat and I are only friends. I think she'd like to be more. I know I would," he explained heavily. He didn't look at Duncan. Instead he stared away across the water with a wistful expression. The tinge of bitterness colored his words and his face, but he smiled in a very human look of awkward embarrassment. His eyes shifted briefly to look at Duncan, who gave away nothing in his quiet stare. "I haven't made love in over two centuries," he admitted. "I'm afraid of losing control, of killing. There was a woman." He spoke in odd starts and stops as if the confession fought its way to the surface. "I thought I killed her. I couldn't stop... It turned out I wasn't the one. LaCroix came in after I had left her and finished her off, then he gave her his blood and turned her into one of us." He looked grim. "I didn't know LaCroix brought her over, made her into one of us. I didn't. She came looking for me, like a ghost haunting me. She damn near killed me too, but I'm grateful."

"For what?" Duncan asked.

Nick's eyes were bright with savage lights. "She was twisted by hatred, but she did me the favor of explaining that I hadn't killed her. That thought had poisoned me forever after. I vowed never to put myself in a situation where I might loose control and kill a woman in the heat of passion. For us the blood is like wine, it steals away control. I lived all these years thinking I had killed that lovely woman," his voice faded.

"Don't tell me you haven't killed," Duncan argued.

"More than my share," the blond vampire admitted. "But I tried to stop. I hated it. I taught my body to make due on animal blood. I don't even kill the animals. I get the blood from slaughter houses. It's cold..." he said softly. "You don't know what that makes me among my kind."

"I know what it makes you," Duncan said sincerely. "To my kind, to humans. A man of principle, of restraint. I think it's admirable. However," he said critically, "Going without sex for two hundred years is a bit extreme," he joked.

Nick laughed. "Perhaps I should talk to Darius. We have this at least in common."

"Well Darius is a paragon of virtue in many ways, but even he has had his moments of weakness," Duncan said. "There are ways to get around a vow of celibacy. Darius vowed to never again lay with a woman. He also vowed to give up the sins of mortal flesh." Suddenly, he realized that Nick was reading the whole truth of his words.

Nick looked shocked. His handsome face beamed with delight. "The answer being immortal men?" he exclaimed. "Macleod!"

Blushing furiously, Duncan defended himself. "Hey, I'm not the one who's gone without for two centuries!"

Nick laughed. "You have a point!"

"Anyway all of that was long ago. Actually, it has probably been two hundred years for Darius. I'm not going to pretend to regret it."

"I believe it was the fashion then," Nick observed. "I seem to recall that women dressed as men in order to please the current fad. Janette went through a brief phase of tailored suits. She wore a sword and plumed hat..."

"Janette," Duncan recalled with a shudder.

"Sorry," Nick apologized. "She's changed too. I think we were both better off free of LaCroix. She settled into running nightclubs, first here in Paris and now in Toronto. Her clubs have become a kind of haven for our kind."

"Wonderful," Duncan growled sarcastically. He took a large drink from his wine glass and noticed the way Nick's eyes followed the motion with hungry intensity.

The barge door opened and Tessa came on deck with coffee and a tray of hors d'oeuvres. "I thought you might be hungry?" she offered with a charming smile.

There was an awkward pause. Duncan intercepted Tessa interposing his body between her and Nick. "Thanks, Sweetheart," he said and kissed her. He looked meaningfully into her eyes.

Tessa excused herself. "Well, I'll leave you two, alright? I think I'll go take a bath and get some sleep," she said brightly, but she frowned at Duncan. Asking questions with her eyes.

For a moment the vampire's sad confession filled Duncan's mind. He wondered what it would be like to live forever and never know love. Her sweet scent drifted to his nostrils and he drank it in. Loving her in this moment with a depth that made him shudder. He kissed the lobe of her ear and whispered, "Love you." The soft feel of her hair against his face and the warmth of her skin stirred desire in his blood.

She kissed him lightly, whispering. "Don't do anything foolish." She went inside.

The two immortals stared for a moment at the closed door.

"Duncan, I want you to know I would never harm her," Nick promised. "And I do envy you."

Duncan let go the breath he'd been holding. He took the tray Tessa had handed him and set it on a hatch cover. The terrible shame was flooding his guilty mind. The intense love he felt for Tessa burned like a brand. "I love her," he said. He straightened and stared out at the ancient cathedral across the water, tall and lit with garish lights it had not changed over time. His heart was squeezed in a fist of dread. "Don't you see?" he said finally. His voice was a little choked. "I'm not afraid of what

you want; I'm afraid of what I want." He turned and saw the puzzled frown on the vampire's face. "It took me a while to recognize my fear. I didn't want to admit it," he said slowly. "The temptation it too strong."

"I can resist. I will keep my promise," Nick said again. "Tessa is in no danger from me?"

The tears came with hot uncontrollable power, but Duncan would not yield to the painful intensity of his emotions. "I know that," he said. "The danger comes from me! What I want! Don't you realize you could give me what I want most in this world!" he cried harshly, trying to keep his angry voice low. "Haven't you suffered the fate of immortality? Watching those you love grow old and die." He saw sympathetic understanding in Nick's face and then the shocked recognition. "Yes," Duncan said agonized. "You could make Tessa immortal!" His hands were fists and his body tense as a bow. "That's my temptation. That's why I didn't want her to know what you were. I was afraid she might think of it for herself and come to you. I'm afraid I might beg you for it."

Nick shook his head. "What I could offer isn't life. You wouldn't want this existence for someone you love."

"You don't think I hate myself for thinking about it? The loathsome seductiveness of wanting to keep her, no matter what cost," he confessed. "And I do want it! I want it so bad that it chokes me inside. I want to spare her the ravages of time, but most of all my motives are selfish. I don't want to lose her. I don't want to grieve. Sometimes, I think I can't do it again." He was almost pleading, for understanding if nothing else. "I've lived four hundred years and never loved anyone the way I do Tessa."

The irony did not escape Nick. "And I have lived twice that long never knowing such a love. Believe me when I tell you that even if I were give her immortality, you would lose her. She would not be the woman you know. And I don't think she would thank you. Tessa has all the qualities we envy, all the vitality of mortal life."

"Immortality doesn't have to change that," Duncan said defensively.

Nick's eyes were sad. "She would never see the sun again. She would never look at another mortal without wanting their blood. It's like being an alcoholic, you can live without the booze, but not the craving."

Duncan looked into the vampire's eyes fiercely. "She wouldn't need anyone but me. She couldn't kill me. I can supply all the blood she'd ever need."

"That's what Janette wanted," Nick reminded.

"That was rape!" Nick exclaimed hotly. "I love Tessa! She could never take anything from me I didn't want to give. I would give her my blood gladly!"

"LaCroix was right," Nick said suddenly. He took a step back from Duncan and his heated passion. "You and your kind are too seductive. The perfect providers of what we need. Have you ever thought we may be meant for one another? Our kind, I mean," he amended.

This brought Duncan up short. "I only know that the temptation you represent is something I never thought I'd face."

"What made you think I'd give in to your demand even if you made it?" Nick asked quietly.

Duncan's face was stern. "I can be very persuasive," he said. He held up the storeroom key.

"You're insane. What were you planning? Starve me, then shove the love of your life into my arms?" he surmised with derisive contempt. "That would get her killed. I wouldn't have the conscious control necessary to bring her over."

Duncan shared his misgivings. "I never got to the planning stages. The thoughts I was thinking horrified me too much to even confront them."

Nick relaxed. "I understand the temptation, believe me. Try to accept that whatever happens, the two of you are better off as you are."

"You know," Duncan said heavily. "If there were a way, I would chose to become mortal, to grow old with her."

"Have children," Nick agreed sharing the old regret.

"Yes," Duncan said. "If it's any comfort, I agree with you. I don't want to want what I do, when I look at her and at you. I'm ashamed of wanting it. I know she would hate it."

Nick took a deep breath. "You don't think I haven't had the same idea cross my mind about Natalie? If she were one of my kind we could..."

"Yeah," Duncan sympathized. He changed the subject, "I've thought about where we might start looking for Flambeau. Maybe his old haunts? Many of the sights of the Inquisition were secret, but I've been able to access the location of some of the ones he used, from computer archives and historical discoveries made during the building of some new buildings along the old route to Lyon. There was an Abbey near St. Etienne. Perhaps it's too much to expect him to hole up in his name-sake." He shrugged.

"Etienne?" Nick scoffed. "He wants to make it easy for me to find him."

"I can't fight him on holy ground," Duncan warned.

"A church would have me at a disadvantage as well," Nick said. "But he's deluded if he thinks parading around in a priestly garb will stop me."

Before Duncan could reply there was a snap of cloth like a banner in a high wind and the deck was empty. Nick had leapt into the Paris night and disappeared. "Damn!" Duncan cursed. He went into the barge to grab his sword. Tessa was sitting up in bed.

"Duncan?"

"I'm going after Nick," he explained.

"Be careful!" she wished. "When will you be back?"

"Before dawn," he said.

"I'll be waiting," she said simply. But it went straight to his heart like a shaft of sunlight.

He rushed out and ran into Richie. "Mac, what's up?"

"St. Etienne," explained. "No time to explain. Look after Tessa. I'll be back before morning."

"You're going after the guy you had locked in the storeroom?" Richie asked.

"Him, I'm trying to save." He got into the car and started the engine.

"Watch your neck!" Richie called.

He rolled down his window. "What?" he asked.

Richie leaned close. "Come on, Mac! An immortal that can't stand the sunlight, being stalked by an immortal vampire hunter? No offense, but your buddy Nick is a fiend of the night." He took something out of his jacket and handed it over. "Take this, just in case." He dropped a silver crucifix and a garlic bulb into Mac's hand.

"You've been watching too many late night horror flicks," Duncan admonished. He put the black car in gear and pulled away from the curb.

ΠΠΠΠΠ

The ruin was covered in flowering vines, now stark like barbed wire coiled against the crumbling mortar and massive stones. A full moon, veiled in winter clouds cast an argent light on the forgotten Abbey. Yellow fire-light spilled from narrow windows at the base of the one tower left intact. Even without the betraying light, he would have known there was life inside. The presence of another immortal was strong.

Duncan parked his car and fought his way through waist-high grass and weeds to the stones of the old Abbey. A woman's scream was swallowed by the deserted landscape. He pulled his sword and ran.

The door to the tower was barred, but the old wood shattered with his second assault. The scent of blood was overwhelming. A woman screamed, "Nick!" in a hoarse frantic voice. Duncan rolled from the floor in the torch light to confront a scene that was torn from history. His stomach rebelled all the same.

The lovely young woman from Nick's photo was tied by her hands to a beam above her head. She did not look injured except for her raw wrists and a little blood on her lips. Her wavy tawny hair was spilled out around her shoulders. Her dress was a simple sacrificial white robe.

Nick lay crumpled against the far wall. His eyes were open and blazing yellow. His fangs gleamed with every panting breath, but he the blood that decorated the walls was his. He looked like a trapped wolf, wounded and panting with exhaustion, but defiant.

Flambeau held a huge broadsword with ease. It was lifted above his head poised for the final beheading stroke. Decapitation would work as well for vampires as it did for immortals. Duncan jumped to his feet and grabbed the blade in both hands wrenching it free and flinging it to the other side of the room.

Flambeau had the eyes of a madman, they were like ice water. His face was handsome, but twisted with fanatic rage. His eyes narrowed. "You defy the covenant! You have violated the rule of holy ground!" he roared.

"I am Duncan Macleod of the clan Macleod, and if I wanted to violate the law I would have used my sword!" He cradled his bleeding hands to his chest as he answered the challenge.

"Macleod!" Flambeau snarled. "The Highlanders who carry pieces of a demon flag into battle." He referred to the fairy flag of the Macleods, now a famous tourist attraction in Scotland. "Devil worshipers, with the blood of devils in their veins, barbarians!"

Duncan was overcome with contempt. "You're mad. Have the centuries taught you nothing? You still believe in old fairy tales and things that no longer frighten children? Give this insanity up, Flambeau!"

"Fairy tales?" Flambeau snarled. "You're a fool. This creature," he pointed to Nick, "is not one of God's anointed immortals. He is a monster! A vampire! I have killed dozens of his kind. They are evidence of the devil's minions on earth!"

"God did not anoint us!" Duncan insisted. "If he did then why are we killing each other through the centuries, why the Gathering?"

"You have no power here!" Flambeau screamed. He whirled and headed for his sword. He picked the heavy weapon up and held the tip to Natalie's stomach. "Leave, Highlander, or the girl dies!"

"Duncan, get Natalie out of here!" Nick pleaded. He held one hand clamped to his chest where a gaping wound sluggishly oozed dark blood. "There's nothing you else you can do." His voice had a strange power and raspy depth, altered by his vampiric transformation to a preternatural timbre, that played along the nerves.

Natalie sobbed. "No, Nick. He'll kill you!"

"No he won't," Duncan swore. He looked into the vampire's yellow eyes. He took off his coat and unbuttoned his shirt.

Nick shook his head weakly. "No, Duncan," he protested. "I've lost too much blood. I won't be able to stop. I'll kill you."

Duncan grinned a buccaneer's smile. "Then kill me. That's the beauty of being immortal," he offered with a wry smile. His selflessly opened his shirt and barred his throat. He didn't see the vampire move. Suddenly he was gripped in a bone crushing embrace. He heard a woman scream and suddenly the rush of cold night air was all around. He felt as if he were being flung through the night sky, held aloft by the hands made of wind.

A fire, like the Quickening was running through Duncan's overheated body. He clung to the source of the electric pulses crying out deep moans of passion. Powerful hands tore his clothing away, with blurring speed. He was still floating, but now he knew his body lay on a cold wet surface that felt like moss covered stone. His vision was a sweet darkness. The arms that held him so tightly released him and a deep voice groaned in denial. Duncan reached out. His mind struggled for the words. "It's alright, Nick. You can't hurt me." He knew what the vampire wanted. He knew it was more than blood.

"Duncan," growled the heavy voice. The powerful mouth and the sharp fangs buried themselves in his throat. It was the last semblance of rational thought Nick possessed.

Duncan felt his naked body. The exposed skin scraped against cruel stone, but the ecstasy enveloping him seemed to make the bruising hurts immaterial. His could hear his own pulse thunder slowly in his ears. His body was rocked in powerful arms, stroked from the inside out with lust. He was dizzy and his mouth was dry. He could feel his life slipping away like strands of silk through his hands. The sweet drowsy sensation was making his limbs heavy.

There was a lion, no a man, bending over him. Hot breath on his neck and muscular heat pressed against him unprotected back. The man was making slow insistent love to him. He wanted to stay with the moment. He wanted to experience this intense euphoria forever, but he was going under. He was dying. His mind cried out frantically, "no, not yet," but it was happening. The swell of darkness was rising up to steal this moment away.

On his back, staring up at a full moon in a wispy clouded sky, Duncan came to. His body was bent back over a large flat stone. Wet moss stained with blood was gripped in both hands. He dragged in a deep breath and watched the cloud of his exhaled life rise up in a silvery haze. He was scratched, bruised and aching, but even as he slowly began to move these hurts began to heal. He felt the oppressive weight of what he'd done settle over him. On impulse he laughed and ran a shaking hand through his wet hair. It was as if he'd been drugged. He tried to remember in clearer detail what had just happened, but it was a fog of half-remembered sensations.

With a groan Duncan stood up and managed to find his jeans and boots. They were filthy, damp and freezing cold. He struggled into their unwelcome shelter and began walking through the fields to the distant light of the ruin.

He was standing on the tumbled stones of the Abbey's walls when the Quickening hit. He could feel the familiar quiver in the air. He smelled the scorched scent of lightning. He wasn't braced. He wasn't ready. Etienne Flambeau was an ancient entity even for an immortal. The strength of his quickening was like being plunged into the earth's searing magma. He screamed as the power poured into his hands and mouth, surging through his flesh and bones with explosive force. He was nearly lifted from the ground. Unnatural winds swirled around him howling with fury.

In the midst of all this, Duncan struggled to hold on to his sense of self. He fought not to lose identity to the gripping tenacity of the powerful departing spirit.

The clash of forces enveloping him abruptly halted leaving him like a marionette with its strings cut. He crashed to his knees, gasping for every precious breath. The air tasted like scorched metal, but his senses were acutely sharpened with the influx of power. His wounds were healed. Duncan struggled to his feet and resumed walking to the Abbey. He could see the flames spout from the windows as an inferno raged within. He stumbled into a run.

"Duncan!" Nick called. He was standing some distance from the ruin. His long coat was smoldering with just extinguished flames. Natalie was running across the stones to greet him.

"Why did you go back in there!" she shouted.

Nick turned to Duncan. He held out the precious sword. "For this," he said.

She was not mollified. "For a sword? You flew back into a burning building for that? Did you forget that fire can kill you?"

Nick's eyes locked with Duncan's. "It was are worth the risk," he said firmly.

Duncan took the old ivory hilt into his hand with gratitude. "Thank you," he said, sincerely. He knew what Nick meant. Their hands touched briefly in the exchange.

"Flambeau is dead," Nick said simply.

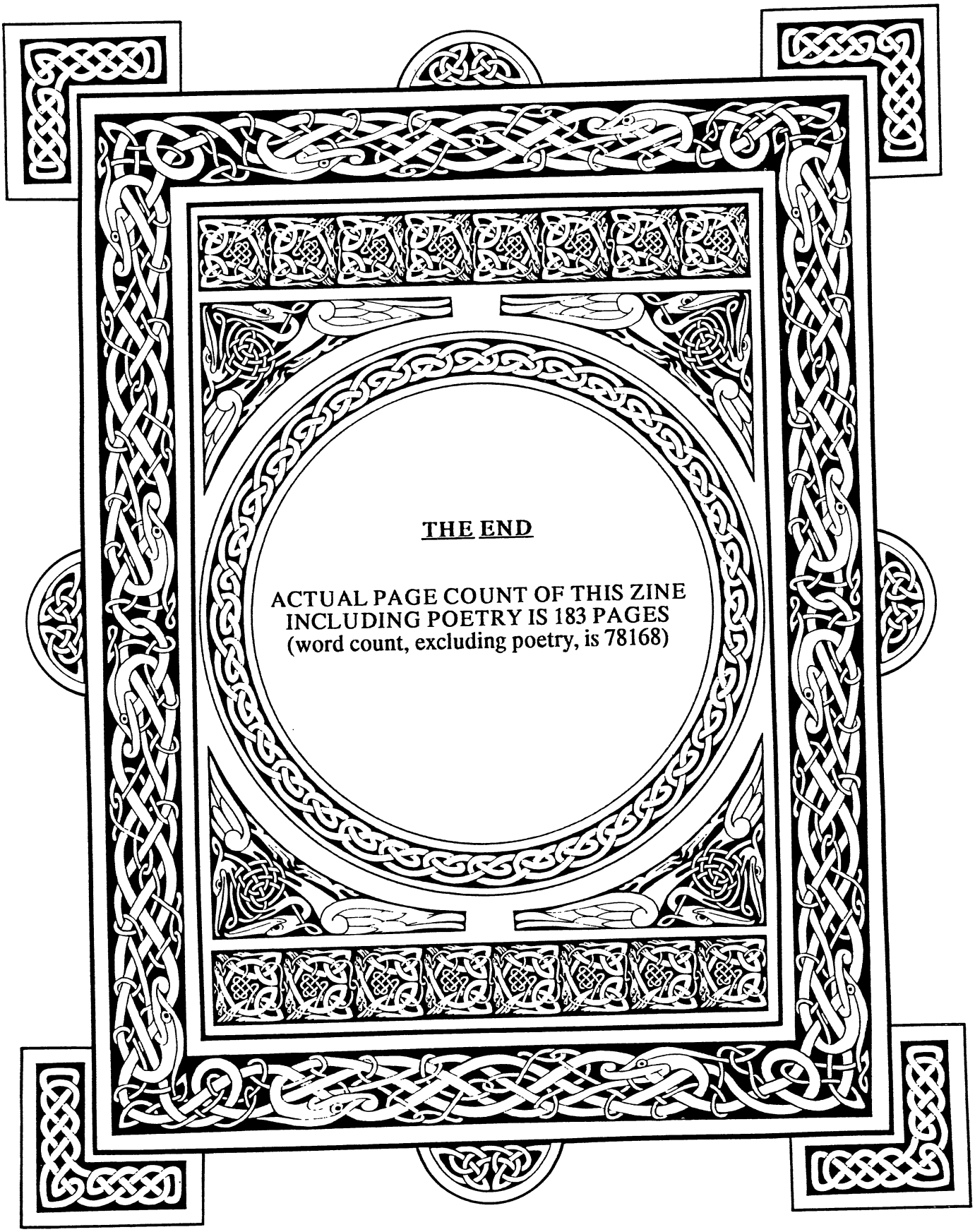
Duncan nodded. "I know." He was looking at the flush of color in the vampire's cheeks. His eyes were and intense vibrant blue and his lips were ruddy. He looked like a vigorous healthy man. He fairly crackled with energy. "I'll drive you back to Paris," he offered. He smiled at Natalie. "Are you alright?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes and no," she admitted. "I don't think I've ever been so scared, or relieved. Thank you for... what you did," she said. She was frowning as she stared at his unmarked neck. She must have seen Nick bite him the first time. Questions burned in her lovely eyes.

She couldn't know the extent of what had happened. Duncan was relieved for that. He watched as she tried to walk barefooted across the stony ground. Without a word Nick put his arms around her and picked her up. The vampire said lightly, "We'll be waiting at the barge."

Duncan heard an incredulous gasp from Natalie as the two rose into the damp winter air. He envied them their flight. The French countryside would be lovely by moonlight.





THE END

ACTUAL PAGE COUNT OF THIS ZINE
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Hot zine! Bizarre and unusual tales all feature great slash themes and writing. Featuring: X-FILES by Dovya Blayque (Mulder/Mulder! honest!), MIAMI VICE--Two stories both of them extra spicy. Crockett/Castillo and ?. (One contains strong S&M but it was too cool to pass up) A must read for Vice fans. BATTLESTAR GALACTICA-- Apollo/Starbuck, very emotional, plus poetry. QUANTUM LEAP--Too weird to explain here, Sam as an albino twin S&M model!?! Erotic as hell, plus another Ql story sure to delight.STAR TREK: NEXT GEN-- Q is meddling once again, this time he has help. He has a plan to ruin Picard and Riker by making them lovers, oh, but is it ruin, or salvation? Funny, touching and sort of deep. HIGHLANDER/FOREVER KNIGHT-- they're both immortals, they're both gorgeous. Need I say more? Also in this issue is a collection of THE PROFESSIONALS poetry that somehow or another missed issue two. HEROES THREE is: 183 quality pages, $20.00 USA and $25.00 Elsewhere.

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A collection of five stories by Taerie Bryant. In the tradition of the series, these innovative stories present a good mix of fun, suspense, adventure and emotion as Sam and Al leap through five very different lives, including a story where Sam leaps into Al before the Quantum Leap experiment on a mission to save himself from his time traveling fate! Length: 150 pages laser printed. Send SASE for flyer. Price: $15.00 (USA) $25.00 (elsewhere)

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